Challenges to Marxism – Marxism and Ethics part two

Kropotkin is aware that the present conditions of the factories are unsatisfactory. They are unhygienic and unpleasant and undermine the well being of the workers. However if the workers are able to control the factories the situation could change and the result will be the creation of places that enable the workers to work in places with an environment that is better than that which was present under capitalism: “Factory, forge and mine can be as healthy and magnificent as the finest laboratories in modern universities, and the better the organization the more will man’s labour produce.”(p147) The point he is making is that the working environment can be transformed with a change in the social relations of production. The capitalist is concerned with profit and so the working conditions express this imperative and are unhealthy but if the domination of capital is ended then the working situation can be transformed. Hence the factory can be made into a environment that is both suited to the needs of the worker for pleasant conditions and the organisation of production. It will still be possible to increase production in a situation in which the worker is not subject to a long working day and is able to determine the conditions of work. Consequently in a situation in which the worker is able to control working conditions it will be possible to plan and organise production in a manner that is more efficient than has occurred under capitalism. The subjection of the worker to capitalism did not result in efficiency and instead the result was often the production of goods of low quality and the result of poor productivity. Only when the workers are able to establish control over the process of work will it be possible to organise production on the basis of need and the result will be greater productivity on the basis of a shorter working day. This situation creates a correspondence between the individual needs of the worker for a shorter working day and the social need for the maximum level of production in order to meet the requirements of society.

Kropotkin is suggesting that if the situation in the factory should change and workers control should be replaced by the direction of the state the result will be not greater efficiency and instead the creativity and potential for organisation of the worker will be stifled and suppressed and the result will be the undermining of the prospect of efficiency. This situation did occur in the Soviet Union of the 1930’s. However Kropotkin’s approach is partial in that he does not explain how the workers of different factories should relate to each other and he does not outline how a democratic plan of production could be devised without the role of a central authority. Instead it is assumed that the voluntary action of the workers of each factory would somehow establish coherent relations that could resolve these problems. This apparent complacency on the part of Kropotkin means that he seems unaware that if factory is unable to establish relations with other factories on the basis of the division of labour and the advice of a plan the result is that the tendency would be for that factory to establish connections with other workplaces on the basis of the logic of the market. However Kropotkin is reluctant to articulate the virtues of planning because that would suggest the role of authority and the possibility of a role for the state. Instead he is content to merely outline the advantages to individual workplaces of the organisational and productive superiority of the end to the domination of capital. This means he does not outline the incentives that would actually promote the realisation of workers control. In contrast a realistic approach would try and recognise the importance of a plan that would encourage the development of workers control and this would require the possibility of the imposition of sanctions for workplaces that rejected the development of workers control. In other words some sort of central authority is vital for the generation of the transformation of social relations. It is not sufficient that voluntary action within each individual workplace could bring about the end of the domination of capital and its replacement by different social relations. The point is that the coercion of the state would as Kropotkin is aware only result in the intensification of the domination of the state over the economy and so the role of the state cannot become superior to the importance of voluntary action. Instead some type of authority is necessary in order to encourage the workers to coordinate production and to accept the importance of planning. This means centralisation would be the result of the advance of workers control. In contrast the dogma of Kropotkin’s anarchist principles means that he cannot envisage any authority.

Instead of the role of authority he argues in favour of what he calls free agreement. This is a conception that the organisation and customs of a given industry has led to an understanding of what is required to ensure its efficient functioning without the role of the state. The result has been that organisations like the railway companies are able to function on the basis of informal proposals and customs and the role of the state has only been to distort this situation in terms of the encouragement of the influence of the big companies over the small companies. But in terms of the daily operation of the railways the role of the state is not necessary: “The agreement between hundreds of companies to whom the railways of Europe belong, was established without the intervention of a central government laying down the law to the diverse societies; it has subsisted by means of congresses composed of delegates, who dismiss among themselves, and submit proposals, not laws to their constituents.”(p164) The problem with this argument is that what Kropotkin is describing is the daily operation of the railway companies and to that extent they may represent complex organisation and efficiency. However as he admits himself if the companies require state intervention they will request it in order to promote monopoly and the domination of the largest companies over the smallest ones. In other words the functioning of the railway companies without the role of the state is conditional and limited and the state will intervene if necessary in order to promote the interests of capital. Hence what Kropotkin is describing as a model of free agreement does not involve the role of the workers who work for the railway companies and instead is an expression of the custom and practice involved to ensure that the railways work efficiently and make a profit.

In other words he is actually describing the functioning of the economic activity of capital according to the laws of the market and describing this process as socially progressive. This is an illusion because the railways do not function on the basis of free agreement but are instead governed by the importance of the profit motive. Hence if the railway companies have difficulty making a profit the state intervenes in order to promote the interests of capital and this results in the defence of the larger companies who have the greatest opportunity to make a profit. The role of free agreement is merely one of the organisational forms that promote the making of profit and therefore this type of free agreement cannot be considered to be emancipatory or an expression of what could be possible in a future society that has overcome the domination of capital. Instead the only type of free agreement that would promote the construction of communism is a free agreement that is based on the importance of workers control. This understanding is lacking in the analysis of Kropotkin because he is merely describing what is effective for the railway companies and this means he is actually arguing that the logic of capital is progressive and is important to the development of communism. In contrast to this illusion we would argue that something is progressive to the extent that it can usefully act in opposition to the logic of capital. The crucial question is can free agreement be used by the working class in the development of communism? We can argue that planning that occurs under capitalism could become transformed and acquire different social ends under communism but it is doubtful if the same could be said of free agreement because the latter refers to what makes the organisation of the railway companies effective. Free agreement cannot be explained outside of the importance of the domination of capital. But Kropotkin has the paradoxical stance that he advocates free agreement for a communist society and yet is reluctant to advocate planning because that represents the role of the state. Therefore what makes capitalism efficient is advocated for communism and what would be important for communist production is rejected!

However Kropotkin’s arguments are stronger when he refers to the importance of voluntary organisations. He mentions the Royal Lifeboat Association and comments: “These men, not being Jacobins, did not turn to the government. They understood that to bring their enterprise to a successful issue they must have the co-operation, the enthusiasm, the local knowledge and especially the self-sacrifice of the sailors.”(P169) In this context Kropotkin is not describing the activity of a profit making organisation and instead is referring to a voluntary organisation that is concerned with general welfare. He is describing an organisation that is not concerned with monetary gain and instead is carrying out a social duty to protect all those that may be in distress on the oceans. This organisation corresponds to his conception of the adherence of well being and is a model of what could be possible under capitalism. The type of free agreement that is required to ensure the Lifeboat Association is a model for communism and is not dependent on making the capitalist system more efficient. Instead its central concern is the social welfare of all.

However his argument is more complex when he refers to the role of the Red Cross of the model of Free Agreement. Indeed Kropotkin is aware that the role of the Red Cross is dependent on the goodwill of the state and its activity is based on the importance of modern war: “The directing committees are presided over by those whom flunkeys call princes of the blood. Emperors and queens lavishly patronize the national committees. But it is not due to this patronage that the success of the organization is due. It is to the thousands of local committees of each nation; to the activity of individuals, to the devotion of all those who try to help the victims of war. And this devotion would be the greater if the State did not meddle with it.”(P173) In order to make his point about the importance of free agreement Kropotkin is prepared to compromise about the question of the state. He is prepared to argue that despite the interference of the state the Red Cross is basically a principled organisation because its aims and actions define it as an organisation concerned with social welfare in conditions of war. The essentially humanitarian objectives of the organisation define its character despite the influence of royalty and the State. However he is not prepared to also accept that reforms within capitalism can also have a progressive role despite being administered by the state such as a shorter working day and the minimum wage. The point being made is that Kropotkin is prepared to be generous in praise about voluntary organisations and yet cannot envisage any progressive action by a bourgeois state. This standpoint represents dogmatism and he also underestimates the character of organisations like the Red Cross who are only able to do good works because of the permission given by the state. The Red Cross acts within the limitations of the state in providing goods for soldiers and it would not have a function if war was not the continual expression of the character of the capitalist system. Hence the very aims and objectives of the Red Cross are defined by the role of the state and the fact that states engage in warfare. However does this situation mean that the Red Cross is not an important and necessary organisation? The point is that the Red Cross can act to improve the conditions of warfare and to this extent it does valuable work. But a Communist would argue that the Red Cross can never act as a model of what is required under communism because communism is based on the overcoming of warfare in the relations between different countries. Consequently whilst a supporter of the Red Cross is acting to modify the conditions of warfare and improve the situation of the soldiers engaged in warfare the Communist has different objectives and is trying to end the very fact of war by the overthrow of capitalism and the realisation of communism. In contrast the praise that Kropotkin gives to the Red Cross glosses over the distinction between the Red Cross and the actions of Communists. The role of the Red Cross is not to ask questions about the limitations of capitalism and the fact that capitalism results in war. Instead the Red Cross acts in an unquestioning manner to improve the conditions of the soldiers that fight the wars. But Communists do question the role of war within capitalism and in order to end war they struggle to overthrow capitalism. However the Red Cross has an organic relation to capitalism and so despite the honourable objectives of many of its members it is not an organisation that communists would wish to emulate. Instead Communists act in order to end a situation that has made the Red Cross necessary and important. The self sacrifice utilised in order to sustain the Red Cross can hopefully be utilised in the most constructive sense of the building of communism in the conditions of peace rather than those of war.

In other words Kropotkin’s conception of free agreement is an inconsistent principle for application to the construction of communism. The example of the Lifeboat Association does provide arguments as to why a voluntary organisation under capitalism can represent a model of what Free agreement would mean under communism. But the utilisation of free agreement to the railway companies was basically an apology for the functioning of capitalism on a daily basis and Kropotkin also admits that the role of the railway companies is often dependent on the role of the state in order to create the most favourable conditions for the generation of profit. Furthermore his reference to the role of the Red Cross referred to an organisation that acts in the conditions of war generated by imperialism and so the importance of its voluntary aspects are outweighed by the fact that the Red Cross would become superfluous under communism. Consequently what is more important than the conception of free agreement under communism is the perspective that working people would attempt to construct an authority that represented their interests.. This would mean that workers control is an expression of the attempt to realise the domination of the workplace by working people. However this process could not be realised by some form of planning and nationalisation if planning and nationalisation was the compulsory expression of the role of a state. Kropotkin is right to insist that compulsion is not the principled method to obtain the consent and participation of the people in the development of communism. Compulsion will only alienate the people from the aim of communism and result in a separation between activity and the implementation of the decision making process. Instead an authority is required that is able to involve both democratic decision making and the ability to enforce these decisions. In this context Kropotkin is making an important point about the voluntary character of activity and the process of decision making and so we could learn from the Lifeboat Association in this regard. However we will not be able to learn about voluntary making decision making form the railway companies who are effectively acting in an autocratic manner to enforce the imperatives of capital. This process is effectively that of compulsion rather than being voluntary and is not a model for communism to emulate. Instead we could learn more from what people do in their daily practice and from how they strive to overcome the limitations of the domination of capital. But we must remember that working people are always subordinated to the imperatives of capital when the capital-labour relation dominates. There is nothing voluntary about this situation and so it is a delusion for Kropotkin to describe some of the expressions of the operations of capital as that of free voluntary agreement. Instead the prospect of what is free and voluntary will only be realised with the actual success in the construction of communism.

Kropotkin also maintains that the advent of communism will create the conditions for the overcoming of the continuation of women’s oppression. He argues that the technological development within capitalism and the prospect to carry out domestic duties in common will result in the demise of women’s oppression within a communist society. Kropotkin understands that the inequality of women could represent one of the most challenging problems connected to the construction of communism. This means the revolutionary communes will have to develop a policy to eradicate female oppression and this prospect will have been made possible by the very advances within capitalism to end the burden of domestic housework being the exclusive task of women. The development of communal laundries and child care facilities will make it possible for women to enjoy the development of their intellectual faculties and to realise equality with men. However Kropotkin does not outline any possible difficulties in the process of the realisation of women’s equality. Instead he assumes that communism has the inherent dynamic to realise women’s equality in economic and cultural terms. This underestimation of any possible difficulties is because of the general Anarchist naïve view that human nature is compatible with communism. Hence the problems in realising equality are essentially connected with the limitations of capitalism. He does not try to outline how the economic and ideological effects of women’s inequality could be inherited by a communist society and could actually undermine the realisation of communism. Instead Kropotkin is content to suggest that if the revolution did not result in female emancipation a further revolution would be necessary. But there is nothing in his work that would imply communism was not capable of realising emancipation.

The approach of Kropotkin suggests that the very progress in overcoming capitalism is identical with the creation of the conditions for communism: “Repugnant tasks will disappear, because it is evident that these unhealthy conditions are harmful to society as a whole. Slaves can submit to them, but free men will create new conditions and their work will be pleasant and infinitely more productive.”(p147) Hence the question of whether this situation is the aim of the revolution or its instant prospect is not discussed by Kropotkin. Instead it is assumed that the revolution will establish the social relations that make these new and pleasant working conditions possible and realise the immediate end to the domination of capital over labour. In contrast Marx does not have illusions in the instant realisation of communism and instead considers communism as the outcome of a prolonged transitional process. The prospect of communism is the outcome of experience, trial and error and the development of the economic and cultural conditions to end the subordination of labour to the imperatives of capital. This means the day after the revolution the working class will still be influenced by the imperatives of capital and it will be a difficult task to realise workers control of production and the creation of new working conditions that end the domination of capital over labour. However the point is that the political domination of the working class generates the economic possibilities to construct communism and end the influence of capital over economic activity. The result of this process is the realisation of communism or a society based on the importance of human need. Kropotkin would argue that this conception is a justification for the continuation of the role of the state after the revolution and the importance of economic inequality because it is being argued that equality is only possible after a long period of the construction of communism. Marx would reply that the revolutionary regime has inherited the legacy of capitalism and that this inhibits the immediate realisation of communism. In contrast Kropotkin would maintain that the prospect to realise human solidarity without restrictions is an expression of the prospect to immediately establish a communist society based on equality. Hence the crucial point is whether the correct policy is adopted to realise this aim. Marx has a wrong conception of the prospect of communism and so would adopt a policy that would perpetuate inequality but the Anarchist would adopt the correct policy that could sustain equality and so realise communism. Marx has the illusion that communism is a long-term process whilst the Anarchist recognises that communism is immediately realisable because the conditions for its realisation have been maturing within capitalism.

Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. The Marxist understands that communism is still the end to be realised and so it is important to establish means that are compatible with that end. Hence the Marxist understands that the process can be distorted by the adoption of wrong means that promote the influence of elites rather than the self emancipation of working people. They recognise the problem of bureaucracy and the distortion of the transitional process and so are concerned with the development of policies that will advance rather than undermine the progression towards communism. The problem with this standpoint is that the Marxist could become the apologist for what is, or the acceptance of the limitations of the present, and this will mean that the ideology of Marxism becomes transformed into the justification of forms of society that do not advance communism. However they recognise that the prospect of the immediate realisation of communism is unrealistic and so the Anarchist approach is not feasible. Consequently the Anarchist approach is based on the imposition of what should be onto reality and the difficulties of the present are ignored. The result of this approach is the rejection of the complexity of the present and instead the adoption of policy that is simplified and over-generalised and so does not have the prospect of realising equality or communism. In contrast the Anarchist would maintain that the objections of Marxism are based on the emphasis on the progressive role of a state bureaucracy and the distrust of the creative and spontaneous actions of working people. If Marxism could recognise the importance of the voluntary action of the people it would understand that immediate communism is possible via the abolition of the wages system and the adoption of a system of equality in the process of distribution. In many countries capitalism has created the economic conditions for the realisation of communism and the activity of the people represents the potential for a society based on the principles of solidarity and equality. However the Marxist emphasis on the state would undermine this prospect of immediate communism and would instead create a bastion of inequality and privilege. This is why a further revolution would be necessary to overcome the Marxist justification of authoritarian socialism as the alternative to communism.

The political conditions have never been created to test the Anarchist approach. Instead all that history has established is the difficulties of the process of transition to socialism and the prospect for the emergence of the domination of a state bureaucracy. Hence the disadvantages of the Marxist approach have been established but this does not disprove the validity of the Marxist approach towards the transition to communism. Indeed the Marxist view that the end of communism should influence the policy of the transition period, or that the means should be related to the end, is still important. The significance of the standpoint of Kropotkin is that he presents one of the most important presentations of the Anarchist view that communism can be the very outcome of revolution against capital. This means that the revolution itself establishes new social relations and the prospect for the realisation of communist principles. However the only way to actually test this perspective would be if the revolution was in accordance with the Anarchist standpoint. But Anarchism does not seem to support Kropotkin in the present period and instead is ambiguous about what type of society would replace communism. Instead the main proponents of communism are still Marxist. They tend to consider that the conception of the instant realisation of communism is voluntarist and so urge caution and patience about the long-term character of the transition period. But Marxists are also aware of the problem of the strong state and its distortion of the aim of communism. Consequently Marxism has made important concessions to Anarchism whilst still generally upholding the importance of the transition period and the approach that communism is not immediately possible. However Marxism also shares with Anarchism the importance of voluntary action and the necessity of self emancipation and rejects the view that compulsion can somehow advance the prospect of communism. These are the lessons of the October revolution and so the Marxist approach to the transition to communism is generally considered to be still valid but aspects of the Leninist approach are rejected or modified.

Kropotkin considered that the limitations of state socialism would mean that it could not form a workable society and instead discontent would result in its demise and the formation of a society that was more compatible with the principles of liberty. The suggestion is that whilst he is aware that Marxism may acquire the mass support necessary to bring about the overthrow of capitalism and install a revolutionary regime it will not be able to build a communist society. Hence this will result in discontent and the attempt to overthrow the Marxist regime by means of a new revolution. The discrepancy between the theory and practice of Marxism will create a situation that is intolerable and the criticism of Anarchism will have proved to have been correct. This means the prospect for Anarchism to become popular in this situation is present because the alternative will be between a form of authoritarian socialism that cannot realise its aims and an Anarchism that has not betrayed its promises and still represents the true principles of communism. However the problem is that when Bolshevism became unpopular for the very reasons outlined by Kropotkin the result was not to the advantage of Anarchism because of its very inability to organise. The call for a third revolution which was made by the Anarchists in 1921 was potentially popular but they were unable to transform the mood of the people into struggle for this demand because of their own organisational limitations. Instead the working people tended to support the views of the traditional organisations like the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionary party. If Anarchism could not make progress in a situation favourable to its advance it has been unable to also develop in other favourable situations. Anarchism has never carried out a critique of its organisational limitations and instead is basically a form of protest and adherents of a vague aspiration for a different future.

Kropotkin does answer some of the most important objections to his version of communism although he does not directly reply to the criticism made by Marxism. He maintains that if the wages system is abolished and voluntary work is established people will still have an incentive to work. He argues that people have already work in a voluntary manner and based on co-operation and solidarity in the village communes and that this example can become generalised within communism: “Well-being, that is to say, the satisfaction of physical, artistic, and moral needs, has always been the most powerful stimulant to work. And when a hireling produces bare necessities with difficulty, a free worker, who sees ease and luxury increasing for him in proportion to his efforts, spends infinitely far more energy and intelligence, and obtains first class products in far greater abundance. The one feels riveted to misery, the other hopes for ease and luxury in the future. In this lies the whole secret. Therefore a society aiming at the well-being of all, and at the possibility of enjoying life in all its manifestations, will supply voluntary work that will be infinitely superior and yield far more than the work has produced under the goad of slavery, serfdom or wagedom.”(p182)

In order to make his argument Kropotkin is making some important assumptions. He is arguing that voluntary work is instantly creative and has overcome the alienation and compulsion of the wages system, and he is also suggesting that society is capable of generating abundance that means people are able to meet their needs without the rationing aspect of wages remuneration. Furthermore he is arguing that society is able to realise the moral aim of well being and has the capacity to met needs without the necessity of any type of compulsion. In order to make this argument he is assuming that capitalism was creating the prospect of voluntary work and that the compulsion of the wages system was because of the domination of capital in the social relations. Hence the political overthrow of capitalism is identical to the creation of a situation of voluntary work and the realisation of a new type of social relations. In principle it is difficult to argue against the standpoint of Kropotkin. Who would defend compulsory work against the prospect of voluntary work that is based on the importance of creativity and self-determination? The strong point of his argument is that capitalism is based on the suppression of creativity and communism is based on the opposite principle of the realisation of creativity. Hence it is not necessary to bring about this situation by compulsion and instead voluntary work is the condition required for the development of creativity. His argument is based on logic and the expression of communism as a moral ideal of well being that is realised by the abolition of the wages system.

The problem with this approach is that it is based on the assumption of the most ideal conditions for the realisation of communism. This is expressed by a situation of abundance that enables the wages system to be abolished and for voluntary work to be started. However we cannot assume that abundance would be an automatic condition of the inception of communism and that is quite possible that some aspect of scarcity could be possible. This situation would immediately modify the possibility for voluntary work and therefore the aspect of compulsion would compromise the prospect to realise creative work and so on. The character of remuneration may not be based on the abolition of wages and instead wages may be required in the situation of scarce resources. In this context the question of what is meant by well-being could become controversial and is likely to be modified and diluted by the problem of scarcity. The issue of scarcity is important because it influenced all aspects of the process of transition in the Soviet Union and would have been an issue for the Anarchists if they had become dominant in Russia. Instead of accepting the complexity of economic conditions which the construction of communism has to confront Kropotkin is only considering objections to his ideal system. He is concerned to defend communism at its highest level of development and in this manner he can control the terms of the debate. The objections to this type of communism are the most ardent defenders of capitalism and who consider that only capitalism provides the motivation and rewards for work and activity. Communism is considered a system without incentives and so would result in the problem of laziness. He argues that the very importance of the moral aim of well being is the basis for the incentive of work under capitalism. The profit motive of capitalism and the compulsion of the wages system have been replaced by the moral aspiration to produce in order to realise the welfare of all of society, or the expression of the well being of all the members of society. This moral aim of well being has a material content in terms of the goods that represent the needs of the individuals of society. Furthermore the creative character of work will represent the incentive to work without the reward of wages.

Marx would argue that the problem with this approach is that Kropotkin has mistaken the features of the realisation of communism with the beginning of the process of transition. This is why Kropotkin has ignored the problem of scarcity that would influence the development of all societies embarking upon the construction of communism. Hence all societies would have an aspect of compulsion in the productive process and this would represent the importance of work for necessity as opposed to the prospect of leisure time. In this situation the prospect of work for creativity may have to be compromised. The point is that the very process of transition to communism should represent progress towards the realisation of well being and the meeting of needs and also the prospect to realise voluntary work on the basis of the enhancement of creativity. This is because the scarcity of the original situation is being overcome and instead abundance is being generated that enables work to occur in accordance with communist principles. Kropotkin would argue that this perspective is a compromise of the principles of communism that is not necessary and is instead an expression of the dogmas of Marxism. Abundance has been created by capitalism and the very task of the increase of production in order to realise the well being of call can be realised by voluntary and creative work. The point he is making is that alienation and compulsion is not a necessary part of a process of transition to communism and instead the immediate introduction of communism is possible because of the feasibility of realising well being and the practicality of voluntary work. Hence Marx is not arguing from a considered understanding of historical development and the character of economic activity and instead is justifying the role of a strong state in the transition to socialism. In contrast Marx would argue that Kropotkin is using his moral principles in order to conceive of communism as a moral ideal rather than a practical expression of objective material conditions.

However the aspiration of Marxists to conceive of communism as a practical process meant that the role of moral aims was neglected and the importance of creative work was replaced by an emphasis on what was necessary and productive. This understanding was justified by a conception of bourgeois rights as the basis of remuneration. Hence communism became conceived as a process of modernisation and not the overcoming of alienation and the realisation of voluntary work. Hence the rigid standards of Kropotkin became to represent ideal criteria by which to evaluate the limitations of the practical approach of Marxism. Indeed it could be argued that the Marxist conception of alienation is in correspondence with the conception of communism outlined by Kropotkin. Where Kropotkin differs dramatically from Marx is in his utilisation of moral aims. The conception of well being is used to define the character of communism and the possible inability to realise well being would represent the failure to realise communism. To Marx this concept of well being would represent a concession to bourgeois morality and the reduction of communism to a moral ideal. He would prefer the conception of communism as a system that is able to realise needs. However Kropotkin would argue that the moral aim of well being can only be realised by a communist type of work that is voluntary work and represents the ability to meet needs and so does not undermine the importance of economics and the understanding that communism is based on the most favourable material conditions. This is why a moral aim can be a guide to action in the development of communism. In contrast the rejection of morality by Marxism represents a justification for policy that is opposed to the principles of communism and instead upholds the interests of the present rather than the aims of the future. Indeed if communism is a system of the present and future it is more difficult to uphold immediate policy that is opposed to communism. In this context anarchism could be said to be the conscience of communism in relation to the task of the construction of communism. The principles outlined by Kropotkin even if they are unworkable in the present do still constitute the basis of the features of communism in the future.

In other words the approach of Kropotkin represents a sense of optimism about the realisation of communism even when he is outlining the objections to the communist standpoint. Arguably Marx has a greater sense of the difficulties involved in the attainment of communism because of his recognition of the importance of a transitional period. However Kropotkin also does not elaborate why the working class will accept without complaint the end to the wages system and its replacement by voluntary work. Who is responsible for the call to end the wages system and to what extent is this demand an expression of the striving of the working class? Kropotkin does not answer this important question and instead makes the assumption that the end of the wages system is the culmination of a process that has resulted in communism. Hence his evolutionary logic is used as a substitution for answering this important question. This means that the issue of democracy is not developed as part of the answer to this important question because democracy is effectively defined as being part of the problem of authority. Consequently society has decided to end the wages system without the role of democracy and without the intervention of authority. Instead in some spontaneous manner society has arrived at the decision to end the wages system but if democratic participation is not involved in this decision it is entirely possible that the decision has not been freely arrived at and instead involves some level of coercion. The concern to maintain Anarchist Communist principles about the rejection of authority and the end to the wages system could become the pretext to defend distortions in the process of the realisation of communism. In contrast Marx has taken from the example of the Paris Commune the importance of participatory democracy as the basis of the decision making of society. This process involves authority but it is authority that is sanctioned by the popular will and is expressed by accountable mechanisms of power. Hence the emphasis on democracy in Marx’s approach is actually the basis for safeguards from the unprincipled use of power and the criteria by which the transition to communism can remain principled and participatory. In contrast the Anarchist equation of democracy with the role of a Parliament means that authority is rejected and so the question as to who takes the decisions is not answered. Instead it is assumed that voluntary work is superior to the wages system and therefore Anarchism is reduced to the argument base on theoretical logic and reason rather than the potential expression of the popular will. This point can be expressed by the fact that the Anarchists generally rejected the importance of the Soviets in the Russian revolution because they had become new centres of authority. They could not accept that the Soviets could express the democratic character of a society that was aspiring to realise communism. This meant they could not appreciate that one of the reasons for the degeneration of the October revolution was the decline of the democratic power of the Soviets.

The point being made is that if the principles of Anarchist Communism are to be more than unobtainable ideals it is necessary to say something about how they will be realised. This means it is necessary to establish the type of authority that will implement the decision to act in accordance with the concept of well being and to abolish the wages system. The failure to answer these important questions means that it is possible to answer bourgeois ideologues about the superiority of voluntary and creative work to the wages system but it is not possible to address the issues raised by Marxism about the character of communism. Instead of this type of answer Kropotkin implicitly defends the view that an omnipotent philosophical will is decreeing that communism will abolish the wages system. Marx is also committed to the abolition of the wages system but the strength of his position is that he is aware that this abolition cannot be established immediately after the revolution and instead it is necessary to prepare the conditions for this abolition. There is also the assumption that this process will occur under the direction of a popular and democratic will and this will mean the actual act of the end of the wages system will be taken on the basis of consent rather than being an expression of the views of an enlightened elite. In contrast the eagerness by which Kropotkin proclaims the principles of communism means that he is not concerned about the process decisions are made and actually denies the very necessity of decision making. This creates problematical situations and the possibility that the abolition of the wages system is the act of a minority rather than a majority. The point is that we can agree with Kropotkin that wages represent a productive system based on compulsion rather than creative work but it is still necessary to develop a majority in favour of this view. It cannot be assumed that after the revolution everyone will automatically be in favour of the end of the wages system even if the conditions are conducive to this end. The arguments will have to be developed and the results of these arguments will have to be expressed by popular votes and it is entirely possible that the ultimate vote will not be in favour of the end of the wages system. In this situation it will be necessary to advance towards communism n the basis of the continuation of the wages system.

The approach of Kropotkin with its disdain for democracy is a recipe for the justification of a type of communist and anarchist autocracy. The anarchists tell us what is in our interests and their views are not subject to the rigours of popular mandate. In contrast Marx recognised that one of the lessons of the Paris Commune is that democracy is not necessarily parliamentary democracy and that universal suffrage still has an important role in the choosing of a government. This means it is necessary to reconcile the importance of democracy with the task of the realisation of communism. In contrast Kropotkin reduces the achievement of communism to an economic task and so ignores its interrelation to the role of politics and democracy. It is true that the concept of well being is a moral ideal that is difficult to interpret in direct political terms but the question of how well being is realised will still involve taking political decisions and the role of democracy. It could be argued that the more democracy is involved the greater is the prospect that well being will be realised. The fact that the Stalinist regime rejected the role of democracy was an important pretext to ignore questions of well being and instead reduce socialism to a question of economic modernisation. Anarchism glosses over these political questions because it reduces all problems to the role of a state despotism but the very possibility for state despotism to develop is connected to the demise of the role of political democracy and the replacement of democracy by the rule of an elite. It could be argued that the crucial issue of the degeneration of the October revolution was not the role of a strong state but that the state developed in influence because it rejected all democratic forms of control. Hence the tendencies of the October revolution did not confirm Marxism as the justification of a strong state instead they confirmed the Marxist view that communism could not be constructed without the role of democracy. The approach of Stalinism was the rejection of the lessons of Marxism rather than the confirmation of Marxism in practice. Anarchism has nothing to contribute to this understanding of the degeneration of Marxism apart from its vague call for a new and third revolution.

Despite these criticisms the standpoint of Kropotkin has outlined the principles of communism by which the post revolutionary regime can be evaluated. He has outlined the importance of the abolition of wages because of the possibilities of abundance and the ability to realise needs and he has also shown the merit of voluntary work replacing the element of compulsion which is an expression of the imperatives of capital and the subordination of labour. He has argued that creative work should replace the mundane and alienated work of capitalism and that this will involve the combining of manual and non-manual work. Work under capitalism is both boring and rewarded at poverty wages and this is because of the interests of capital. This situation can be ended when the domination of capital is replaced by the interests of the producers to define their own work and to act in accordance with aims that are not based on the profit motive. However he does not answer the question as to when this process can be realised. Instead it is assumed that communism will not require a process of transition. This is the major difference between Kropotkin and Marx who is adamant that communism cannot be realised in the short-term after a revolution. To Kropotkin the standpoint of Marx allows for the possibility that because economic activity in the transition period is not at the level of the standards of communism the result will be new forms of oppression and exploitation. Hence it is either creative work or new forms of work that represent exploitation and the failure to abolish wages will create the possibility for the re-emergence of the profit motive. In contrast Marx is arguing in favour of transitional forms that will advance the prospect of progress towards communism, and so labour tokens place wages. These labour tokens will represent fairer expressions of the value of work even if economic equality has not been consistently realised. Work will also be creative even if the discipline of necessity is still present and an aspect of the creativity of work will be the recognition that one of the aims of work is the construction of communism. Consequently the inability to instantly realise communism does not mean that a new type of exploitation is being justified rather it is a recognition that capitalism cannot instantly be transformed into communism and that some of the conditions for communism have to be created in the transition period. However, even if we accept the approach of Marx as basically valid it is still necessary to utilise the principles of Kropotkin in order to evaluate the progress being made towards communism. Hence to what extent has creative work replaced compulsion in the production process and to what extent has manual work become a new form of skilled activity? The failure to provide convincing answers to these questions would indicate that problems are occurring in the process of transition to communism. In other words we cannot easily reject the approach of Kropotkin concerning the realisation of communism even if we still accept that Marx’s standpoint is more realistic.

Kropotkin also argues that under communism few people will not accept their responsibility to work because the cause of idleness has been overcome as a result of the prospect to carry out activity in accordance with their talents. It was the requirements of the profit motive that created a situation in which people did work they did not want to do. But if a person persists in not attending the workplace under communism then moral pressure will be used in order to ask the person to find new forms of employment.(p191) The problem with this standpoint is that because the character of moral pressure is not based on the role of law or any type of regulation it is open to the possibility of being utilised in a discriminatory manner. It is possible that someone who has a good work record may be asked to leave the workplace because for some reason they have offended their workmates. In other words because of the lack of procedures, codes and regulation, the prospect of discrimination is present in the type of society advocated by Kropotkin. The lack of authority means that arbitrary action can be used to isolate and victimise individuals and they lack the right of redress. Kropotkin does not consider this is a problem because he defines society in terms of perfection. This means everyone is contented and is making a constructive contribution to society because of the fact that work is creative and everyone is working together because of the common cause of communism. The cause of idleness has been overcome which was the condition of low wages paid for boring work and instead everyone is satisfied and determined to contribute to the development of society. But the problem with this standpoint is that it denies the possibility of contradiction and tensions within society. Some people may still have to do work they do not want to do in the initial period after the revolution and problems may occur at the workplace that involve issues of discipline. If these tensions are to be solved the role of moral pressure may not be ideal. Indeed moral pressure could be used to isolate the very person with answers to the problems. Instead if the problems are to be solved in a constructive and agreed manner it will be necessary to have grievances procedures. However, Kropotkin cannot accept this possibility because it would imply the importance of authority within communism and also suggests that people are fallible and not perfect. The point is that Kropotkin can only envisage the problem of inferior and low quality work under capitalism and that if low wages are replaced by rewards in accordance with needs all these problems will be solved. But what if work is difficult and the issue of how to develop production in an efficient manner is a complex question? In this situation the answers are not simple and cannot be resolved by the dogmatic view that all will be solved by an end to work for wages. Hence it may be necessary to establish technical committees with authority in order to promote production and the role of the plan will have to be concerned with quality of work. In contrast Kropotkin cannot envisage any of these problems because capitalism has been replaced with communism.

These limitations in Kropotkin’s standpoint are an expression of the major flaw in his approach which is that Communism is presented as an immaculate society without any important problems. Communism is the standard by which capitalism is evaluated and so it is a moral ideal of how the most perfect society would act. Hence it seems that communism is not being presented as what is practically realistic and instead is presented as a society that is flawless. This is why he cannot envisage the prospect of continued discontent or alienation and therefore suggests simplistic answers to what are considered to be temporary problems. However in his actual description of the development of communism Kropotkin is also capable of a more complex approach. He recognises that if the communist society does not have coherent priorities the result could be regressive and lead to failure. This means the communist society must resolve the problem of food or else it will not succeed in its objectives. Hence the question of policy is vital to the success of the development of communism. His approach to priorities is realistic and he is aware that failures in policy will lead to the downfall of the communist society. But when he is outlining the objections to communism he defends the superiority of communism in the most dogmatic manner. Instead of presenting communism as the fragile outcome of capitalism the question of the future of communism is reduced t the role of individual behaviour. He is then able to argue that individual behaviour will not be a problem under communism and instead the system can be presented as flawless. It is assumed that communism can be successful and that any discontent will be temporary and easily resolved through moral pressure. In this context communism is reduced to the dogmas of Anarchism and is conceived as a society without authority. But in the other description of communism it is presented as requiring firm authority in the matter of policy such as the resolution of the food problem and in realising other priorities. Communism is presented as being a system that can easily lapse into crisis if the right policy is not adopted or else it is conceived as being without problems. This is the contradiction in the standpoint of Kropotkin.

The issues become more serious when Kropotkin is obliged to defend his standpoint from the adherents of parliamentary government and labour tokens. He argues that parliament has become an inferior form of representation that does not overcome the problem of rule by elites. It is decaying and is in crisis and support for the role of Parliament results in the defence of capital. The problem with this analysis is that it glosses over the importance of democracy. It is possible to differentiate between the limitations of Parliament as a system of representation and yet still advocate the importance of democracy. This was one of the lessons that Marx made from the experience of the Commune. How could it be possible to develop a type of democracy that overcame the limitations of Parliament? The answer of the Commune was not to abolish universal suffrage or the role of political parties and instead they acted to develop a more participatory and accountable form of democracy. This form of democracy would represent the authority of a society that was trying to develop an alternative to capitalism. The fact that it failed in this aim did not mean that its attempt to develop participatory democracy was a failure rather the experience of the Commune would act as a model for all future revolutions aiming to realise communism. Kropotkin’s approach is dogmatic because he equates the importance of Parliament exclusively with the role of capital and so does not recognise what is progressive about Parliament which is its limited expression of democracy. Hence the question is how do we develop a higher form of democracy rather than reject the importance of democracy along with the role of Parliament. Indeed Parliament has expressed some relation to democracy and so the issue is not the bringing about of the demise of Parliament and is instead about how to transform Parliament into an organ that can promote the higher form of democracy and the aim of communism. The answer of the Paris Commune was to transform what was a Parliamentary organ into the Commune which was based on universal suffrage. The Commune was directly accountable to the people through the role of elected delegates who could be recalled. In other words the political organs of power were reconstructed and transformed but they retained important aspects of the former Parliamentary system. However, the functions of the Commune were changed in that the Commune no longer served as the instrument of capital even if it was not able to become the political representation of the promotion of communism. It was the prototype of a workers state with the potential to advance communism.

In contrast Kropotkin is equating all types of Parliament with the role of bourgeois democracy. He does not seem to accept that in certain circumstances Parliament can become a Commune type organ and so express the popular will in a democratic manner. Instead the assumption is that Parliament has to be replaced but what it should be replaced with is not clarified. Hence Parliament is denounced and the question of what political institutions should replace it and express democracy in a superior manner is not elaborated. We are told what is wrong with Parliament but we are not given an understanding of its alternative. The assumption seems to be is that the spontaneous and voluntary will of the people does not require an institutional form, or that the role of the Commune should not become a government. How society can act without institutional authority is not explained. On the other hand Kropotkin has already outlined the importance of correct policy and the significance of priorities and so he has provided the justification of authority. The point is that this type of authority will take the form of a dictatorship unless it is related to the role of a democratic authority. It would seem that the question of democracy is a urgent question for Kropotkin but he ignores it because of the dogmas of Anarchism.

However Kropotkin seemingly is able to advocate the demise of wages in stronger terms. He argues that the Collectivists who support labour tokens have an inconsistent approach to the end to private property: “It is the same with the wages system; for after having proclaimed the abolition of private property and the possession in common of all means of production, how can they uphold the wages system in any form? It is nevertheless what collectivists are doing when they recommend labour cheques.”(p201) From the standpoint of logic Kropotkin’s approach seems to be the most consistent because he is suggesting that the abolition of private ownership of the means of production should also result in the collective allocation of the means of distribution in the form of the end of private and individual wages and all substitutes for wages such as the labour tokens. He argues that Proudhon recommended labour tokens because he was in favour of a certain type of private ownership of the means of production but this form of consistency cannot explain the approach of Marx. Instead Marx is for the end of private ownership of the means of production and yet is for the continuation of a private type of distribution in terms of the role of labour tokens. To Kropotkin the only way in which this inconsistency can be avoided is to support the immediate abolition of wages and its replacement by a form of remuneration in common or distribution in accordance with need. However, Marx would argue that his inconsistency represents the problem of the complexity of the transition period to communism. This means it is not possible to immediately abolish wages and instead the role of the wages system that does represent the condition of exploitation and the extraction of surplus value will be replaced by a superior form of wages or labour tokens that are a fairer expression of distribution. The labour tokens are not an expression of equality because skilled work will still be rewarded higher than unskilled work and to that extent the labour tokens represent bourgeois right rather than a communist system of the allocation of the rewards of labour. This means that labour tokens are transitory until the material situation can be created for the abolition of wages and the realisation of needs in common. The objection of Kropotkin to labour tokens as the continued expression of a form of private property would create the tendencies for the reintroduction of private property in the means of production. In other words the contradiction between the condition of the means of production and distribution would have to be resolved one way or another and this would mean ether the restoration of capitalism or the abolition of wages and the promotion of the prospects for communism.

Marx would suggest that the choice presented by Kropotkin is a choice based on dogma rather than recognition of the importance of the productive forces. The material conditions may not yet be favourable for communism and in this situation it is not yet possible to abolish wages. Instead a partial measure is taken which is the replacement of wages by labour tokens. This will enable the process of remuneration to be more closely connected to the value of labour and also represent the end of the extraction of a surplus value by capital from labour. But the condition of continued scarcity means that the abolition of wages and the realisation of rewards for work in common is not immediately possible. This does not mean that the conditions for the restoration of capitalism are being generated by these economic conditions and instead partial measures are being taken that will advance the process of progress towards communism. The problem with the approach of Kropotkin is that he is assuming all or nothing and so he considers that partial measures can only be compromises that generate the forces of capitalism. The point Marx is making is that the introduction of labour tokens are not the expression of a rejection of the abolition of the wages system and instead are the measure that is transitional to the abolition of wages. The point is to understand what is necessary at any given moment in time and not to defend a dogma that cannot be introduced directly after the revolution. In this context Kropotkin’s approach represents the principles that we aspire to realise but it does not represent the basis of realistic policy. Instead it is necessary to devise the transitional policies for the moment by which the ultimate aim of the abolition of wages can be advanced and eventually realised.

Kropotkin would argue that it is not feasible to organise production on a different basis for consumption. Production would be based upon collective organisation whilst distribution would occur in terms of labour tokens that represent the importance of the claim of the individual to the rewards of work. He concludes: “Well, for us it is evident that a society cannot be based on two absolutely opposed principles, two principles that contradict each other continually. And a nation or commune that had such an organization would be compelled to revert to private property in the instruments of production, or to transform itself immediately into a communist society.”(p207) in reply Marx would argue that it is possible to organise production and consumption on contrasting principles because of the very fact that the immediate transition to communism is not possible. The problem is the legacy of the conditions inherited from capitalism and which might not be conducive to the short-term transition to communism. This situation is expressed by scarcity and the only way to resolve this problem is to accept a compromise between the process of production and distribution. The process of production is collectively organised in order that democratic planning can occur and the priorities of the economy are defined by the end of communism. On the other hand the distribution of the resources of consumption is based on the principle of bourgeois right or the acceptance of inequality in the process of remuneration. In a sense the importance of this contradiction could create the possibility for it to be ultimately resolved by the restoration of the principle of private property in the means of production. However, this prospect is undermined by the fact that there are limitations to the role of bourgeois right and restrictions are put on the level of differentials between skilled and unskilled work. The attempt is made to make bourgeois right compatible with the character of a society that is aiming to realise communism. This is a process of compromise and flexibility but there are limitations to the extent of compromise and the end of communism is an expression of what is permissible at the level of means. Hence the reality of bourgeois right is a temporary compromise that will be replaced by the collective distribution of the products of consumption on the basis of collective principles and the related abolition of the wages system. In contrast Kropotkin defines this compromise as unprincipled and a rejection of the aim of communism that should be immediately realisable in both production and consumption. He envisages society as a harmonious whole that cannot allow for any contradiction and tension. To Marx this is a non-dialectical approach that is unable to explain the fact that the process of the building of communism may have to allow for the co-existence of conflicting principles. The point is that unfavourable material conditions have generated the importance of this contradiction and wishful thinking will not overcome this contradiction. Instead we have to devise the policy that will enable the contradiction to be resolved in a manner that advances the progress of the end of communism.

It could be argued that historical experience has confirmed the views of Kropotkin rather than Marx. The fact of inequality at the level of consumption has been utilised in order to define a new regime of privilege rather than being the expression of a complex process of movement towards communism. Kropotkin would argue that the regime of a state bureaucracy is required in order to defend relations of inequality at the level of consumption. Marx was aware of this problem which is why he was critical of Lasselle’s conception of a people’s state that would act on behalf of the workers. What is crucial for Marx is that a transitional regime should continue to uphold the end of communism and should not dilute this end in order to justify existing policy. Hence bourgeois right is not a virtue in itself and is not acceptable when the prospect of communism is being established. Instead bourgeois right is necessary in order to allocate the proceeds of distribution in the situation of the immediate aftermath of revolution. If communism could be instantly realised bourgeois right would be unprincipled. Consequently the real point of difference between Marx and Kropotkin is about the question of transition. To Kropotkin communism is an instant prospect and so unequal and private forms of distribution are unprincipled. It is entirely possible to abolish the wages system the day after the revolution. But to Marx it is an important error to conflate the principles of communist economic activity with what has to occur in the immediate transitional period. Communism is not on the immediate agenda and so the situation will be characterised by some form of co-existence between the legacy of capitalism and the emergence of the new forms with a potential for communism. The task is to overcome the old forms in a sober and realistic manner whilst encouraging the development of the new forms. This task can only be realised by the development of the most appropriate policy. In this context bourgeois right in the process of consumption can advance the end of communism even if it still expresses aspects of the old economic forms. It is necessary to recognise the limits of compromise and what could become unprincipled from the standpoint of communism. Hence Marx would reject the justification of a state bureaucracy that had unequal access to the resources of the economy as being against the end of communism. The development of the Stalinist bureaucracy was not a confirmation of Marxism and instead was an expression of a divergence from the end of communism.

The problem with Kropotkin’s argument is not that he cannot provide convincing reasons why the process of distribution should be organised in a communist manner. His standpoint that production and consumption should be in a state of harmony is very convincing. The problem arises in terms of how this principle should be realised and he does not elaborate the arguments as to why this correspondence should be based on instant communism. The objection to his standpoint is because of his failure to envisage a transition stage before communism. Instead of making this argument he simply assumes that the revolution is identical to communism and so he does not even consider the problems that revolutions can create in terms of social chaos and economic and political dislocation. The Bolsheviks recognised these problems in terms of the concept of the costs of revolution resulting in a decrease of the productive forces and therefore they understood that the process of revolution can contradict the very end of communism. In contrast Kropotkin is defining social events in terms of a basic evolutionary harmony and therefore revolution will smoothly promote communism. The Marxist understanding of the importance of the class struggle recognises that history is not smooth and harmonious and this is one reason why capitalism does not mechanically and automatically prepare the conditions for immediate communism. There is a discrepancy between the political possibility of revolution and the economic maturing of the conditions for communism. The conception of the transition period is one attempt to reconcile the upheaval of revolution with the aim of communism. In contrast Kropotkin simply assumes that the character of revolution will result in communism without any complications. This is why he can dismiss any attempt o dilute the principle of the abolition of wage labour as an expression of the attempt to dilute the aim of communism. However if he recognised the complexity of the class struggle and of the relation between revolution and communism he would be able to understand why compromise in economic policy is not necessarily a repudiation of the aim of communism.

Kropotkin argues that the supporters of labour tokens are suggesting that the system of production and consumption can be organised in accordance with incompatible principle: “Collectivists begin by proclaiming a revolutionary principle – the abolition of private property – then they deny it no sooner than proclaimed by upholding an organization of production and consumption that originated in private property.”(p205) In order to resolve the complexity of trying to establish a fair system of rewards for a given amount of labour in a situation in which the tendency is for the skilled to receive greater share of the proceeds of consumption it will be necessary for the state to intervene. Hence the system of labour tokens will presume a role for the strong state which acts as the centralised authority that distributes the labour tokens. The state defines who is entitled to the labour tokens and the amount they can receive and so it is presumed that the state has an important economic role. This is compatible with the approach of Marxism but is not consistent with anarchist doctrine. Hence all Anarchists who support labour tokens are defending a form of economic activity that is not compatible with their principles. Furthermore the complexity of the process of the distribution of labour tokens will result in controversy and so a Parliamentary type of organisation will be required in order to mediate the allocation of labour tokens. The result of the role of a strong state and Parliament will be to promote the emergence of capitalist types of economic activity. The only way to overcome this situation is by the complete end to private property in the distribution of labour tokens by the abolition of private property in the forms of distribution.

Marx would argue that the distribution of labour tokens does not require a strong state and instead it is the act of a planning mechanism. What is important is not the role of a state but instead an authority that can assume responsibility for the process of distribution. Furthermore the aim is not to consolidate the situation of the role of labour tokens and instead it is about creating the conditions for the abolition of the labour tokens. Marx recognises that labour tokens are unsatisfactory and are not the alternative to the abolition of wages in the condition of abundance. Hence the role of labour tokens is temporary and they are an expression of the heritage of capitalism within the transitional economy. It is not considered satisfactory that labour tokens are still required as the reward of labour instead of the abolition of wages but the point is that the conditions are not yet present for the abolition of wages. In contrast Kropotkin considers everything from the standpoint of principles and argues that it is unprincipled that labour tokens are being considered as necessary and he argues that this is a betrayal of the principle of ending private property in distribution as well as production. What he does not consider is that it may be possible to end the role of private property in the process of production before consumption. He is right to suggest that the role of labour tokens may result in complexity and controversy about their distribution but this is precisely why democratic authority will be required in order to resolve these disputes about the process of remuneration. This does not necessarily require a strong state and instead what is needed is planning. In this context people will accept that the planning authority has tried to distribute the rewards of labour in a fair and equitable manner. It will also be possible to appeal to the planning authority if people consider they have been treated unfairly. Consequently if the system has been successful in the process of distribution through labour tokens the process of consumption will not undermine the organisation of production. Instead consumption will be in correspondence with the planning of production. The limited concession to the importance of private property in the process of distribution will not undermine the planned character of production. Indeed it will be possible to advance the principles of equality and the end of private property within the process of distribution in relation to how the labour tokens are allocated. Also success in the development of production will create the conditions for the abolition of the wages system.

The experience of the October revolution showed the problems involved in the premature end of the wages system. The scarcity of goods led to massive price increases and the devaluation of money and the resulting inflation led to the effective end to any value for money. This situation led to barter replacing the role of money as a universal equivalent and the related demise of wages. The result was not the end to private property in the process of consumption but rather trade and distribution acquired primitive forms and a crude form of capitalism prevailed. It was necessary to re-establish the value of money by the development of a new currency that would enable trade to occur on a sounder basis. The point is that in conditions of scarcity the abolition of wages was a premature policy. It was instead necessary to create the material conditions that would make the abolition of wages possible and necessary. Kropotkin did not ask any relevant questions concerning the possible effects of the premature abolition of wages instead he could only conceive of the principled character of the end of private property in the means of consumption. This also meant he could only conceive of the unprincipled character of the failure to end private property in the process of distribution. Furthermore he also could not contemplate that people may even prefer to receive the rewards of labour in a private manner for a considerable period after the revolution. Indeed he is indifferent to what people may want or aspire to if it resulted in problems for his principles. Hence he could conceive of an all or nothing situation, of either complete communism or else a regression towards capitalism and the intervention of the role of the state. He could not accept that the conditions may not be conducive for complete communism and he could not envisage that the people may not want complete communism in the short-term. The prospect of the abolition of wages may not be the immediate option of the people in relation to the process of obtaining the means of consumption. It was an understanding of these difficulties that led Marx to recognise that labour tokens could have a role in the process f distribution and that they did not represent the betrayal of the principles of communism. Labour tokens represented the means to promote the end of communism. In contrast Kropotkin could not envisage anything as the means to the end because all he could conceive was the instant realisation of the end. In that sense the abolition of wages was the end rather than being transitional to the end. To Marx this approach was a serious underestimation of the difficulties and complexity involved in the process of the realisation of communism. Hence labour tokens were not advocated because they were considered efficient and were instead an expression of the compromise that was required whilst the conditions were still not maturing for communism. This is why Marx would gladly accept that labour tokens had difficulties in terms of their calculations and were not equitable as described by Kropotkin. For example how was it possible to compare so many hours of the work of a steel worker with the comparable labour of a coal miner? Marx did not have a rigid answer to this question but rather he understood that discussion and compromise would be important in order for labour tokens to represent the rewards of labour. Marx would have accepted the abolition of wages if he had thought it was immediately possible. But he did not accept this possibility because of the basic difference he had with Kropotkin. This was that he accepted the importance of a transitional period before communism. The result was policy differences such as an acceptance of the role of labour tokens.

Kropotkin argues that the view that the rewards of labour should represent inequality is to accept the approach of capitalism towards inequality as valid. The view that skilled work should be paid more than unskilled work is a concession to the elitist view that skilled work is worth more than unskilled because of training and experience. These views gloss over the importance of capital for defining the level of wages that are paid to each occupation and the fact that the functionaries of the state have the highest levels of remuneration. This is why the inequality of wages should be replaced by the abolition of wages: “For us the scale of remuneration is a complex result of taxes, of governmental tutelage, of capitalist monopoly. In a word, of state and capital. Therefore we say that all wages theories have been invented after the event to justify at present existing, and that we need not take them into consideration.”(p210) Marx would not necessarily deny that the divide between skilled and unskilled work is a differentiation that is based on the character of the division of labour of capitalism and related process of the rewards of labour. He would also be aware that wages are also an expression of what the workers have struggled to achieve and that the maintenance of differentials is connected to this situation. The workers themselves do not want to dilute the difference between the rewards of skilled labour when compared with unskilled labour. These aspects would have to be taken into account when trying to develop a system of remuneration that would be accepted by all types of labour in the transitional epoch. It will not be immediately possible to realise the aspirations of labour by the abolition of wages and therefore complete equality will not be possible in the short-term. Instead it will be necessary to consult with the workers regarding wages and what would be acceptable differentials. It will not be expected that the workers will be happy about ending the differentials between skilled and unskilled work. Instead we can expect that differentials will be upheld but that the aim of the plan will be to narrow the gap in wages and to work for the realisation of equality. What this will mean in practice will be a question of complexity because workers will have different circumstances and requirements. However, compromise will be vital in order to attain a level of rewards for labour that is acceptable to all. The short-term material aims of the workers will have to be reconciled with the long-term aim to abolish the wages system and realise communism in the process of distribution.

In contrast Kropotkin would consider that this policy of compromise and consultation was an expression of unprincipled practice. He would denounce the results as a betrayal of the principle of equality. The influence of bourgeois ideology would be considered to have resulted in the rejection of equality and the refusal to abolish the wages system. But Marx would reject these criticisms and instead would suggest that the crucial question is how is the process of the transition to communism most effective. In this context it would not be advanced by the creation of a system of rewards for labour that is rejected by most of the producers. The majority of the produces would not aspire to a system of rewards that immediately rejected the differentials between skilled and unskilled work. Instead they would accept that the rewards for unskilled work had to be increased in the context of the continuation of differentials. In this context a process of movement towards equality has actually occurred even if complete equality has not been realised. This prospect of inequality will be present until the conditions for complete equality are realised with the complete realisation of communism. However the important point is that the movement towards equality has to occur in a process of movement that is acceptable to the producers and in a manner that does not estrange them from the aims of communism. This point has been ignored by Kropotkin. Kropotkin would also argue that inequality in wage levels is most beneficial to the members of a state apparatus. The state would utilise the inequality in the process of distribution in order to realise domination over the process of production. This situation did occur in Russia and to that extent Kropotkin’s criticism was historically accurate. But Marx did not envisage the role of a strong state that enforced its will over the process of production and distribution. Instead the state should represent the will of the people because of the importance of democracy and participation. Hence the state should be a democratic organ that acted in accordance with the aspirations of working people in the process of movement towards communism. In this context the state would uphold the wishes of the people concerning the rewards of labour and the functionaries of the state would not be paid high wages. The democratic will of the people would ensure that the state did not acquire a privileged domination over the process of production and consumption. The fact that a strong state emerged in Russia was because of historical reasons rather than being an expression of the views of Marx about the transition to communism. In contrast Kropotkin’s standpoint has authoritarian aspects in that he assumes immediate and complete communism can be created without the mediation of democratic authority. The question then arises who is the mediation of communism? Kropotkin’s failure to answer this question means that an omnipotent will enforces the realisation of communism and this approach could justify the rule of a minority over the majority. Hence the abolition of wages would be enforced by the will of reason despite the majority of the people being in favour of wages and some form of inequality. The logic of Kropotkin’s standpoint is to justify revolutionary terror and to deny the importance of democratic authority in the decision making process.

Kropotkin argues that wages represents the monetary form that most benefited the interests of capitalism and the reintroduction of wages because of the principle of from each according to their needs would become the basis to reintroduce capitalism. This is because wages or labour tokens cannot value work in any meaningful sense: “Services rendered to society be they work in factory or field, or mental services, cannot be valued in money. There can be no exact measure of value, (of what has been termed exchange value), nor of use value with regard to production.”(p213) It is often impossible to compare the value of one individual in one hour’s work with that of another whose value is that of two hours work and who do you say is most important in a coal mine. The person in charge of the lift shaft, or the actual miner or engineer: “All the miners engaged in this mine contribute to the extraction of coal in proportion to their strength, their energy, their knowledge, their intelligence, and their skill. And we may say that all have the right to live, to satisfy their needs, and even their whims, when the necessaries of life have been secured for all. But how can we appraise their work?”(215) Hence “No distinction can be made between the work of each man. Measuring the work by its results leads us to absurdity; dividing and measuring them by the hours spent on the work also leads us to absurdity. One thing remains: put the needs above the works and first of all recognize the right to live, and later on the comforts of life, for all those who take their share in production.”(216) If the needs of society are reduced to the level of work even though it is impossible to compare different forms of work the state will intervene to provide what is charity in the process of distribution. This will not be communism but instead the development of the power of the state over the process of production and distribution. But there is an alternative which is that society will reject the impossible attempt to calculate the value of work in accordance with hours workers and instead will argue that society should met needs by the abolition of he wages system and so capitalism will be replaced by communism.

Kropotkin has provided a strong argument that it is difficult to calculate the value of labour in accordance with hours worked. However Marx is also critical of this standpoint and he would agree that the character of the value of individual labour is difficult to evaluate and calculate. What is important to establish is that the value of labour under capitalist relations of production is established in accordance with the requirements of the extraction of surplus value. The value of labour is established in accordance with the limits of subsistence and the related attempt to reduce wages to poverty levels. The workers struggle to raise wages to higher levels. In the transition period and this means the value of labour will be subject to a process of democratic consultation and express what is required for the advance of society towards communism. It is possible that wages will be raised to the highest levels and that only the requirements of the surplus will represent a limitation. Only the immediate lack of conditions for communism will prevent the immediate abolition of wages. In this context the issue of the relation of hours to the value of labour tokens will not be rigid and inflexible. This is because of the very difficulty in trying to connect hours of work to value in the manner described by Kropotkin. Instead the labour tokens will represent what the working class itself considers to be a fair reward for labour and will generally represent the differential between unskilled and skilled work. Hence the point made by Kropotkin that is difficult to establish objective criteria of the value of work is valid and the conception of hours worked is an inadequate expression of this approach and so results in many difficulties. Instead it is necessary to understand that the importance of hours worked is connected to capitalist relations of production and is represented by the socially necessary hours required to create a product. This is a conception that relates hours worked to the logic of the market and so is inapplicable for the transition period. Instead the importance of hours taken to produce a good in the transition period will be a guide to the allocation of resources by the plan and cannot necessarily be a reliable guide for the reward of labour. However this does not mean that the abolition of wages is an immediate prospect because of the scarcity of resources and the fact that abundance is not present just after the revolution. The role of labour tokens is related to the situation of scarcity and is not necessarily a precise indicator of the value of hours worked.

It is a misconception that Marx considered the role of labour tokens in terms of the hours worked. This was an approach that was supported by people like Robert Owen. In contrast Marx considered the importance of labour tokens as the expression of the continuation of bourgeois right within the transitional economy. They were an expression of the fact that complete equality was not yet possible and the prospect of the abolition of wages was not yet feasible. Hence the importance of hours required for the production of a good was more important for the allocation of resources by the planned economy. It was possible to calculate the amount of time that was required to produce a particular item. This issue was distinct from the more complex question and impossibility of rewarding labour in accordance with hours worked. Kropotkin was quite right to insist that it was very difficult to establish which type of work was more productive than another type of work. Consequently all that Marx emphasised was that skilled work would have higher levels of reward than unskilled work. This situation was only temporary as long as the transition period lasted. The aim would be to narrow the difference between the rewards for skilled and unskilled labour until a situation was reached in which the abolition of wages was made possible because of the creation of a condition of abundance. Hence Kropotkin’s criticism of the utopian socialists was quite astute for believing that it was possible to calculate the productivity of labour in terms of hours worked and therefore the equation of labour tokens with hours worked was a flawed conception. But this did not mean that labour tokens did not have a place in the transitional economy. The problem with his criticism of labour tokens is that he assumed that the immediate establishment of communism via the abolition of wages was possible. With this perspective he could define labour tokens as unprincipled and unworkable. However if we acknowledge that immediate communism is not possible then labour tokens may have a role. This role is not the expression of exact hours worked which is impossible to calculate and instead they represent the character of the remuneration of labour in accordance with aims of the transitional economy to make progress towards communism. Hence labour tokens are a subjective expression of policy rather than being the exact calculation of hours worked. This does not mean that the question of hours worked is not relevant because this is an important aspect of the planned economy and in relation to the allocation of resources but it is not important for determining the rewards of labour for the reasons given by Kropotkin.

Does the rejection of the immediate abolition of wages result in the rewards of labour being reduced to the status of charity that is distributed by the state? This perspective is dogmatic. The point is that the character of the distribution of rewards should not be an expression of the role of the strong state in the transition period and instead is subject to a process of democratic consultation. Hence the trade unions should have an important role in determining the level of rewards for labour and the whole process should be based on workers control. Indeed the plan of production should be the outcome of workers control rather than state centralisation. Consequently if democracy is important in determining the rewards of labour the outcome should not result in discontent and the possibility of strikes. The authority for the distribution of labour tokens will be with the institutions of workers control rather than the state. Hence Kropotkin is right to assume that if the state has an active importance in the process of distribution of the means of consumption it can control this process for the benefit of dominant elites. However this situation is what Marx is trying to avoid by the methods of economic democracy and recognition of the importance of consultation. This standpoint is not articulated in the Critique of the Gotha Programme but it is developed in his writings on the Paris Commune. The workers state is not like previous forms of the state because democracy is flourishing and influences all aspects of society. In this context the state does not impose its decisions onto civil society and instead the aspirations of civil society dictate the activity of the state. To this extent the state withers away. The view of Kropotkin that the only alternative to immediate communism is a situation of the centralised power of the state is problematical if we conceive that immediate communism is not possible. Instead we have to conceive of an authority that is the highest form of democracy and which can distribute the means of consumption without the influence of privilege and the tendency for hegemony. Kropotkin believed that the skilled workers would benefit from a situation in which the state distributes resources and controls the process of consumption. This is not Marx’s aim which is to connect democracy to economic decision making. Hence the character of the role of the state should be to advance communism via the progress of democracy and equality and not to promote the omnipotence of the state and the privileging of certain social groups. This is why Marx would reject the view that he is authoritarian and for the centralisation of the state and instead would argue that the distribution of resources and the process of consumption should be subject to the popular will.

However the actual experience of the October revolution did seem to vindicate the approach of Kropotkin. The failure to abolish the wages system and replace it with distribution in accordance with need meant the state increased its power and distribution was according to the charity or goodwill of the state. This meant that certain groups had better rations than others and the result was the promotion of a new form of inequality under the auspices of the role of the state. The Bolsheviks would contend that this criticism ignores the unfavourable conditions and the immaturity of the situation for communism which meant the state had no alternative than to develop the criteria for the process of distribution. The state had to favour those groups that would contribute the most to the development of the productive forces in a situation of isolation. In other words the importance of state centralisation was not the expression of a dogma and instead was the outcome of adverse circumstances and the only alternative would have been to accept the restoration of capitalism. The problem with Kropotkin’s approach was that he reduced communism to the premises of a moral ideal of wellbeing and if reality did not realise this principle he denounced the result as being the rejection of communism. He did not understand the complexity of the situation which was about surviving politically in terrible social and economic conditions and to establish a bulwark of socialism until the world revolution could develop. The balance of the class forces was important for defining what could be considered acceptable policy and what was unprincipled. Instead Kropotkin had a rigid definition of communism in terms of the vague concept of well being and the complexity of reality did not influence his conception. In Kropotkin’s defence he would argue that if well being is not realised it is not possible to realise communism. The Bolsheviks had a policy that replaced the importance of well being with state centralisation. This meant they were building a society that was not communist and instead imposed the will of the state upon society.

How would Marx reply to the view that communism is based on well being or else the policy of society is based on different criteria that is effectively opposed to communism? Marx did not study this question and we can assume that he may have considered the concept of well being as representing a moral standard that had nothing to do with the practical criteria of how we evaluate the realisation of communism. However his conception of abundance as the criteria of the possibility of communism is similar to Kropotkin’s understanding of well being because abundance represents the basis of well being. What is controversial is Kropotkin’s view that labour tokens do not represent the advance of well being because they justify inequality in the process of distribution and well being cannot be reduced to hours worked. Marx would reply that labour tokens may be an inadequate expression of the rewards of labour but they are necessary until the conditions for the complete abolition of wages is made possible. In this context labour tokens are not incompatible with well being and instead represent well being at a given stage of historical development. The realisation of well being requires a transitional process that has forms that may be inadequate in terms of completed communism but they are still necessary if the advance to communism is to occur. However if we were to try and impose communism before the material conditions were present the result would not be the realisation of well being and instead society would decline at the level of production and prosperity. This is the important point not acknowledged by Kropotkin.

Kropotkin argues that the approach of Marx is influenced by bourgeois political economy in considering the requirements of production as primary and so ignoring the importance of the realisation of needs. This is why bourgeois political economy considers that the answers to all questions is the increase in production and therefore the issue of how to realise needs is neglected: “If the most imperious needs of man remain unsatisfied, what might he do to increase the productivity of his work? Might it not be that production, having lost sight of the needs of man, has strayed in an absolutely wrong direction, and that its organization is at fault? And as we can prove that such is the case, let us see how to reorganize production so as to really satisfy needs.”(p226) The point being made is that bourgeois political economy is based on the interests of capital and this means that production is differentiated from human needs in order to justify the extraction of surplus value and the role of profits. Marx is unable to consistently develop a critique of bourgeois political economy because he is not opposed to the priorities of capitalism and instead considers production as being primary and as differentiated from the importance of needs. Hence Marx does not develop a conception of communism based on well being because of the influence of bourgeois political economy in his approach. It is necessary to develop a conception of communism based on the realisation of needs if the ideological influence of bourgeois political economy is to be overcome. This suggests that we would establish communism in order to create a system of production that is based on the realisation of needs. Marx rejects the prospect of immediate communism because he does not accept that need is the primary aim of production and instead considers that production is primary in and of itself, or that the aim of modernisation should replace the objective of communism. Marx would reject this criticism. Instead he would argue that his aim is the realisation of a society based on need instead of profit. However the point is how do we realise this type of society? Marx would argue that we cannot be indifferent to the tasks of increasing production because capitalism may not have created the conditions to make communism materially feasible. The revolutionary regime may not have inherited a situation in which the levels of production are able to meet the needs of society. Instead the conditions have still to be created via the development of production of the situation of abundance. Only after this period will it be possible to realise needs. The apparent similarity between Marx’s approach and bourgeois political economy is illusory because he does not consider that production is actually primary to consumption in terms of the importance of accumulation. Instead he would share Kropotkin’s view that production should be an expression of the requirements of consumption and the realisation of need in the process of the development of communism. However he is aware that the very process of the development of production will also promote the ability to generate consumption. This understanding is also recognised by Kropotkin when he argues that the city should produce manufactured goods in order to exchange them for food from the countryside. Consequently it would be wrong to define Marx’s conception of communism as being identical to modernisation and the most rapid development of the productive forces. Instead he would agree with Kropotkin that what is important is the role of need. Where they differ is that Kropotkin believes that an instant communism based on need is possible whilst Marx acknowledges the importance of a transition period.

This explanation would not satisfy Kropotkin who would argue that only communism realises needs and all other forms of economic organisation are unable to meet needs and so would generate alternatives to communism: “Let us also observe that if the needs of the individual are our starting point, we cannot fail to reach Communism, and organization which enables us to satisfy all needs in the most economical way. While if we start from our present method of production and aim at gain and surplus value, without taking into account if production corresponds to the satisfaction of needs, we necessarily arrive at capitalism, or at most at Collectivism – both being but diverse forms of our wages system.”(p229-230) The perspective is that only complete communism, which is based on the demise of the wages system, can realise human needs. All other forms of economic organisation accept the logic of surplus value and so accommodate to the domination of capital over labour and therefore cannot adequately realise human need. Hence he rejects any sense of a transitional period that has aspects of capitalism and yet is making progress towards communism. This stage would be defined as unprincipled and therefore will result in the re-emergence of capitalism rather than the development of communism. Presumably the logic of surplus value will be more important than the promotion of need in the transitional period and so the state will act as a capitalist rather than the facilitator of communism. The only prospect of communism is with the immediate abolition of wages and the installation of an economy based on need. What is important is the question of the priority of need. On the one hand Kropotkin is being dogmatic because he denies the prospect of a society being primarily based on the realisation of need and yet it has still not abolished some form of wages. He can only envisage that this type of society will still be concerned with the extraction of surplus value rather than the importance of achieving need. Consequently he considers all forms of transitional society as being unprincipled and a betrayal of the aim of communism. In contrast we can consider two types of transitional society, firstly the transitional form that is promoting the re-emergence of capitalism via an emphasis on surplus value and the exploitation of alienated labour. Secondly, the transitional form that is primarily concerned with need and the importance of consumption. This society would be progressing towards communism and would not be a betrayal of the approach of Kropotkin despite the retention of the wages form and other aspects of capitalism. The important question to answer is what would be the trajectory of society and to what extent do working people influence the economic process. To Kropotkin these issues are not important because only complete communism is principled and the basis to overcome the prospect of the restoration of capitalism. His argument is with the principled character of the transitional period.

It is important to accept that some capitalist societies may be mature enough for the immediate realisation of communism. The prospect of a transitional period is not a historical necessity and instead depends upon circumstances. It may be unprincipled to advocate the formation of a transitional stage when the conditions are present for the abolition of the wages system and the related realisation of need. In order to evaluate this issue in a principled manner it will be necessary to recognise the importance of the circumstances in which the revolutionary regime emerges. The prospect of international revolution will make instant communism feasible and realistic. But even this stance is unprincipled to Kropotkin. He seems to be arguing that under all the diverse situations of revolution the aim should be to generate instant communism and the realisation of need replacing profit. He does not accept that under certain circumstances a transitional regime will become the only feasible option. The aim of this regime will be how to realise need in the most efficient manner and this process will require the highest levels of democracy. But to Kropotkin the very conception of a transitional stage is a concession to the ideological limitations of bourgeois political economy and represents the acceptance of the importance of profit and the priority of production over consumption. Marx would reject this criticism that he is influenced by bourgeois political economy and instead what is important are the social conditions in which the revolutionary regime emerges. The point is that we do not make history of our own choosing and instead the constraints of the past influence our policy in the present. He would contend that Kropotkin is adopting a voluntarist standpoint that glosses over the importance of social conditions in his support for instant communism. Instead of this voluntarism we have to develop a strategy for communism and to devise a policy that can promote communism rather than unintentionally advance the restoration of capitalism. Kropotkin is actually providing a strong argument as to what is possible in the most favourable social conditions; we should not be opposed to advance the cause of communism. But Marx is suggesting that a transitional stage may be unavoidable and that in these circumstances it would be foolish to advocate communist measures like the abolition of wages. The point is not that Marx or Kropotkin are right about what is necessary for communism but rather that both have something substantial to say. However history has not developed in a manner that could be anticipated by either Marx or Kropotkin instead history has been dominated by the effects of the degeneration of a revolution. In this context the supporters of a true Marx or Kropotkin have not been able to test their respective theories about communism.

Kropotkin also maintains that the conception of a crisis of overproduction is an error generated by bourgeois political economy. He is adamant that the emphasis on production for export means that in many industries there are not enough goods to ensure the well being and needs of the producer. The problem is that of under-consumption rather than overproduction:”We discover moreover that the most advantageous use of all commodities would be for them, to go, first for satisfying those needs that are the most pressing: that, in other words, the so-called “value in use” of a commodity does not depend on a simple whim, as has often been affirmed, but on the satisfaction it brings to real needs.”(p230) He is suggesting that the capitalist system is based on priorities that do not adequately realise human needs and instead goods are produced as commodities for the realisation of profit. The result is that the requirements of producers as consumers are not realised and instead commodities are part of the process of capital accumulation and this means goods are exported rather than becoming the expression of the attainment of the needs of the producers. Communism would radically modify this situation because goods would no longer be commodities produced for profit and instead would represent the capacity to realise needs. This would mean that under consumption would no longer be a problem and instead there would be a correspondence between demand and the ability to met needs. Supply would be in a correspondence with demand rather than the supply being below the requirements of demand because of the imperatives of profit making. This possibility would be connected to the reduction of production for export and instead production would be in order to realise the demands of need. The economy would be organised in order to meet the requirements of need rather than profit.

Marx would agree that the economic activity that replaces capitalism has to have different priorities because it is no longer based on the extraction of surplus value in order to generate capital accumulation. The aim of production will be connected to the role of consumption and the realisation of human need. In this context goods will no longer be commodities in the capitalist sense and instead have the character of use value rather than exchange value. The major question will be about how a good can realise need and not about the amount of abstract labour it represents and the exchange value it can realise. Hence the type of economy that is envisaged by Marx is similar to that proposed by Kropotkin even if some of its features are different. The importance of need will be vital to both Marx and Kropotkin. They differ over the tempo at which wages can be abolished and whether communism is an immediate prospect but they do not disagree that the profit making logic of capitalism has to be replaced with a different logic and that logic is the realisation of need. Marx refuses to call that society communist because it may lack certain of the aspects of communism such as abundance but the aim is to realise communism in terms of overcoming the poverty of capitalism with a dynamism that is able to establish a more coherent correspondence between production and consumption. Marx would agree with Kropotkin that supply of a good should not be lower than demand. If supply is lower than demand the aim would be to rectify this situation as soon as possible and to allocate resources for the production of the good and so bring about compatibility between supply and demand. Marx would not accept that raising the price of the good is an acceptable approach for the lowering of demand in relation to supply. This is because the actual demand is still present despite some of the consumers not being able to purchase the product. Instead he would be in favour of lowering the price of a good so that the expression of a high level of demand is able to obtain the good. Consequently if need is not realised because of the discrepancy between supply and demand the ability to advance towards communism will be undermined. However if need is satisfied because of the ability to relate supply to demand this will be an important expression that progress towards communism is being realised. Marx would agree with Kropotkin that need is an important criteria of how we define a society and is an important feature of communism. It is the very problem in realising need before communism that is an important reason why society would not be defined as communist and instead would be considered as transitional or in motion towards communism. This society would still have scarce resources that undermined the ability to realise all needs and instead would sometimes still meet needs in an inadequate manner. The task would be to overcome this problem in order to advance towards communism. If the society was unable to meet needs consistently this would be an indication that it was not advancing towards communism.

The USSR was not advancing towards communism because of its consistent inability to realise needs. Immediately after the revolution the situation was characterised by the inability to provide adequate levels of food and the process of modernisation did not result in the overcoming of scarcity and poverty. The level of demand for goods was constantly higher than the supply and often the quality of goods was dire and resulted in goods that were not sold. Planning and nationalisation did not solve these problems and instead made them worse because the command economy was inflexible and led to waste and the production of low quality goods. Despite this situation the 1936 constitution proclaimed that the USSR was socialist despite continued poverty and the inability to met basic needs. The important contradiction of the system was that the needs of the bureaucracy were realised because of their inherent privileges and yet the working class remained poor and with unsatisfied needs. The situation intensified because of the increasing aspirations of the bureaucracy to transform itself into a ruling class based on a profit making system. Furthermore the fact that the needs of the workers and peasants were not realised was an expression of the fact that the system was not advancing towards communism and that need was not the dynamic of the system. Instead economic activity was characterised by stagnation and inertia and the process of planning was in accordance with the interests of the bureaucracy rather than the population. In other words we can utilise Kropotkin’s conception of the importance of need to define the USSR as not being socialist or communist. The priority of the system was not the realisation of need and instead it had a logic that was only able to realise needs in the most inadequate manner.

Kropotkin assumes that after the revolution society will be able to meet needs because of its communist organisation. Marx would dispute this assumption because the legacy of capitalism may not have generated the possibility to immediately realise a society based on need. However the important question is how is a society that is not yet communist to progress towards communism by its ability to realise needs? Kropotkin would argue that a transitional society is based on the rule of a centralised state and so is not inclined to meet needs in an adequate manner. Marx would dispute this claim and instead argue that a transitional society can have communism as its aim and so recognise the importance of realising needs. It is not possible to realise needs if a premature attempt to establish communism is made before the conditions for its emergence have developed. Hence the ability to met needs will require the correct policy and the role of a democratic authority with the popular power to take complex decisions. This will establish how quickly the process of the establishment of communism can develop and the more that needs are meet the more it is understood that progress is being made towards the attainment of communism.

Kropotkin argues that the economic crisis of capitalism takes the form of under-consumption rather than overproduction. Only economic analysis can establish whether he is accurate in his assessment. However we would dispute that support for the view of overproduction is effectively support for capitalism against communism. The point is that capitalism results in crisis because of the limitations of a system based on capital accumulation and it is a system that is able to realise needs in an inadequate manner. This is one of the major reasons for supporting communism and opposing capitalism. Hence Kropotkin is right to argue that the superiority of communism will be its ability to realise needs in a more effective manner than capitalism. If a system claiming to be communist is not able to realise needs better than capitalism we can establish that its credentials to be communist are problematical. In this context Kropotkin is making a powerful point that capitalism may be a system of consumerism but it is still characterised by under consumption and the inability to meet needs. Hence affluence is not a problem generated by capitalism and instead is an expression of what could become truly possible in a communist society. Instead capitalism is still characterised by poverty and the inability to met needs and so the historical development of society requires communism that would be able to meet needs. However we would dispute the contention that the process of meeting needs requires self-sufficiency and instead the international division of labour has a rationale that enables needs to be attained in the most effective manner. This is why the prospect of communism requires a world revolution. In contrast Kropotkin has provided the arguments for communism within one country and he argues that needs can be realised within the limitations of a single country. The implicit assumption is that the success of communism does not require world revolution. This argument was developed before the process of Stalinist degeneration and he is complacent about the possibility for the global economy to be able to distort the development of communism in a single country. However he also provides arguments in favour of international revolution and so there is an inconsistency in his standpoint.

Kropotkin would reply that just as the division of labour is limited by its rejection of the possibility of creative work and so is opposed to what is required under communism the same can be said for the international division of labour: “But a new current of thought induced all civilised nations to manufacture for themselves. They found it advantageous to produce what they formerly received from other countries, which in turn aimed at emancipating themselves from the mother country. Scientific discoveries universalised the methods of production and henceforth it was useless to pay an exorbitant price abroad for what could easily be produced at home. Does not then this industrial revolution strike a crushing blow at the theory of the division of labour which was supposed to be so sound?”(p236) What Kropotkin fails to recognise is that the process he is describing is just the latest expression of the generation of capital accumulation. He is describing the situation in which some countries attempt to establish their independent expression of capitalism by developing their own manufacturing and steel industries. The result is that the international division of labour is modified rather than ended. Hence this process has not actually led to the establishment of self sufficiency as the expression of the latest forms of economic development. Instead some countries have become industrial nations and have ended their dependency upon the most advanced countries. Consequently technical and scientific development has led to the restructuring of the world economy rather than its demise and replacement by atomistic national units. If a person is to retain an independent and pro-communist standpoint they would outline the importance of these changes in terms of what is happening within capitalist social relations of production. The result of this approach would not be an uncritical view that communism was being advanced and instead it could be argued that the forces for inter-imperialist and national conflict were being promoted by the national fragmentation of the world economy. In this sense communism would represent the internationalist alternative to national rivalry based on the increasing independent economic development. The fact that Kropotkin did not have a theory of imperialism was one reason why he tended to support what he defined as the good nations like France and Britain against Germany the bad nation. His lack of a political economy of international relations was one reason why he adopted this pro-imperialist standpoint.

However his general critical views of the division of labour are not against his communist perspective. He outlines in a powerful manner why the division of labour is in the interests of profit making rather than creative work. This is why communism is based on trying to develop forms of creative work rather than perpetuate the division of labour Unfortunately he did not outline how this alternative would develop apart from suggesting people would become experts in the understanding of production rather than being reduced to cogs in the wheel and the appendage of machines. This approach was more principled than the Bolsheviks who argued that the division of labour could be progressive in a workers state. They argued that the Taylor system of mass production could be adapted and utilised by socialism. However the result was the increase of discontent and the growing contradiction between the party and workers. The Bolsheviks major aim was the increase in production rather than having an emphasis on how to realise the creative character of work. This approach was based on support for state centralisation rather than workers control. In contrast Kropotkin’s emphasis on creative work presumed that the working class would be able to define what work was and how it could be utilised in order to realise needs. Hence creative work was voluntary work and was based on the lack of state compulsion. He was also making the point that if the division of labour is an expression of the process of capital accumulation its organisational methods cannot be utilised in a communist system. Instead communism would have to develop organisational methods that were more suitable to its character. In contrast the Bolsheviks advocated one-man management and the end to workers control. Kropotkin advocated the role of co-operatives as the alternative to state centralisation but he did not elaborate what this meant. The Anarchists were able to suggest how the Bolsheviks were carrying out incorrect politics but they were not able to suggest coherent alternatives. But Kropotkin’s elaboration of the features of communism provide an alternative in terms of the favourable contrast between creative work and mass production. However the Anarchists had become oppositional and so their major concern was with the overthrow of the Bolsheviks. The development of the alternative conception of communism was not carried out until later in the 1920’s by Alexander Berkman.

Kropotkin notes briefly that Germany is a dynamic nation and produces its own manufactures at the highest level of technical development. However he does not elaborate what this means n terms of competition with France and Britain and the related political implications. Instead he develops his arguments that countries are becoming more self sufficient. He contends that “Every nation finds it advantageous to combine agriculture with the greatest possible variety of foundries and manufactories. The specialization, of which economists spoke so highly, enriched a number of capitalists but is now of no use. On the contrary it is to the advantage of every region, every nation, to grow their own wheat, their own vegetables, and to manufacture all produce they consume at home. This diversity is the surest pledge of the complete development of production by mutual co-operation and the moving cause of progress, while specialization is a hindrance to progress.”(p245)

Kropotkin is describing capitalism as he would wish it to be rather than it actually is constituted. The period he is describing is actually based on a world economy that represents the role of interdependent trade and specialisation. Hence the aspect of national fragmentation is expressed by the conflict between rival empires and the competition for raw materials and markets. What he is describing as a beneficial development within capitalism is actually the manifestation of imperialism and the dynamic of trade war and the prospect of military conflict. He considers that the period of the global economy based on the international division of labour is coming to an end and is being replaced by a situation of national self sufficiency. But the reality is that the interdependency of countries is taking an antagonistic form and is creating the conditions for economic tensions and political conflict. Kropotkin is unable to recognise the development of these antagonistic trends because he can only envisage the possibility to enhance the prospect of communism. In this context he considers that the apparent manifestation of self sufficiency will create the economic conditions to realise communism in the advanced capitalist countries. This means he is unable to understand that what is happening is the expression of the latest development of the contradictions of the capitalist world economy. His failure to fully understand the development of imperialism means that he does not understand how it is expressing a situation of crisis rather than the progress of economic development. Lenin and Bukharin outlined how imperialism represents the contradiction between the socialisation and internationalisation of production and the limitations of the national form of economic activity. The result of this process will be war and the prospect of revolution. In contrast Kropotkin seems to envisage a national conception of revolution based on the importance of the self sufficiency of production. He cannot establish the international dynamics of revolution and the transition to communism. Instead communism is a national expression of a process of economic evaluation that results in revolution. However Kropotkin cannot elaborate how and why revolutionary class consciousness would arise in this situation of the advance of the self sufficient economic unit. Hence revolution is based on an assumption that capitalism is reaching its limits and is creating an inexorable process of change. But this point is not articulated in terms of an analysis, perspective and strategy. Instead Lenin and Bukharin explain how the very development of capitalism is intensifying its contradictions and creating the conditions for change. However the working class will have to develop an internationalist class consciousness for revolution to become possible and feasible. Kropotkin’s praise for the self sufficiency of capitalism is actually promoting nationalism within the working class rather than internationalism and therefore is not promoting a principled conception of class consciousness. The result of his approach was to support British and French capitalism against Germany in 1914 and so to oppose the development of anti-war sentiment within the international working class. This indicated that Kropotkin did not have a strategy to intensify the class struggle and to advance the cause of communism.

The lack of perspectives is an expression of the major problem in Kropotkin’s approach. He is orientated to the future and ignores the question of the relation of the present to the future. The result is a conception of communism that has little relation to the possibilities and developments of the present. In contrast Marx is orientated to the present and tries to indicate how the present represents the potential for revolution and transition to communism. This is why he wrote capital in order to indicate that the process of the extraction of surplus value would promote the class struggle and advance the prospect for revolution and communism. He also outlined how the Paris Commune represented a model of the type of society that could replace capitalism and advance the prospect to realise communism. The point is that utopian constructions of the future had not resulted in an understanding of the possibilities for communism instead it had been the very developments of the class struggle in the present that had indicated that communism was not a dream and instead could be the outcome of the dynamism of the emergence of mass movements in the present. In contrast Kropotkin is not primarily concerned with the progress of the class struggle and instead he argued that the inspiration for the class struggle would come from the elaboration of the most convincing conceptions of the communist society of the future. This would inspire the people to strive for communism and communism was expressed by the connection of the imagination generated by human activity and its connection to the emergence of the prospect for a different future. The more that we develop the imagination with increasing convincing elaborations of the communist future the more people will strive to realise them. Hence communism was the relation of the outcome of revolution with the importance of the imagination. This is why we should not dilute the conception of communism with compromises that undermined the realisation of communism. This is why communism did not require the role of the state and was about the abolition of wages rather than the continuation of private property in the means of distribution. Marx argues that this approach was unrealistic and that the actual lessons of the Paris Commune indicated the importance of a different approach to the realisation of communism. The very formation of the Commune would promote the importance of democracy and outline its relation to the prospect of advance towards communism. An event in reality had indicated how progress towards communism could be made. Hence the crucial question was to promote the class consciousness required for the revolutionary transformation that would put communism onto the agenda. But Anarchism did not know how to promote this class consciousness because of its voluntarism, sectarianism and reluctance to acknowledge the working class as the most important revolutionary agency of social change.

Marx’s criticism of Anarchism was convincing in its time because it indicated the difference between an emphasis on the role of a programme of change and a future orientation that was unable to connect the present to the future. However the failures of Stalinism show that Marxism is not able to continue to emphasis past lessons of the class struggle like the Paris Commune and the October revolution as the models of communism. It has to elaborate what is meant by communism and to outline how the communist future is expressed in the present. In this context the approach of Kropotkin could provide inspiration concerning what is meant by communism and therefore advance the standpoint that communism can be the result of human historical evolution. Communism can be the culmination of the solidarity developed within human activity and is the highest form of ethical society made possible by history. In this inspiring manner the question of what is communism becomes part of the present and the development of the class struggle. This means that Marx’s reticence to outline the features of communism in detail will be shown to be understandable for its time but it has become dogma in relation to the task of developing revolutionary class consciousness. Instead an understanding of what is meant by communism will become part of the programme for the promotion of revolutionary change and the conception of communism will no longer be the monopoly of anarchists like Kropotkin.

Ironically Kropotkin does realistically outline the economic prospects of a country that realises its revolution in isolation from other countries, the result would be that the other countries would reduce their exports and the result would be that the revolutionary regime would have to practice self sufficiency such as increasing its agricultural production. It is interesting that Kropotkin does not consider the importance of a world revolutionary perspective in order to create the political conditions to overcome this isolation and he does not analyse whether the prospects of communism will be undermined. Instead he argues in favour of a type of national communism and insists that because the revolution results in the enhancement of creativity the result will be fruitful and result in the progress of communism: “A revolution is more than the destruction of a political system. It implies the awakening of human intelligence, the increasing of the inventive spirit tenfold a, a hundred fold; it is the dawn of a new science the science of mean like Laplace, Lamarck and Lavoisier. It is a revolution in the minds of men, more than in their institutions.”(p249) The argument is that the creativity of humanity will be able to overcome adverse problems however difficult. This is true to some extent because the very character of communism should be about realising the potential of humans in the form of creative work and thought and so they should be able to solve important problems. However there is a limit to what humans can achieve in relation to the complexity of the situation. It is not possible to achieve the impossible and as Marx argued humans make history in a situation not of their own choosing and so this imposes limits and restrictions that cannot be transcended despite the utilisation of creativity and potential. In this context it could be argued that it will not be possible to realise communism in the conditions of national isolation and the continued domination of the capitalist world economy. This is because not only have exports of vital goods been reduced from other countries but also because these countries may be more productive and so capable of undermining the economy of the revolutionary regime. The pressures exerted by the global world economy may create the logic for the restoration of capitalism within the revolutionary regime. Hence it is an illusion to believe the reliance on self sufficiency and the creativity of the people will be able to promote communism instead of the impulses for the re-emergence of capitalism. This does not mean that the creativity of the people and the promotion of self sufficiency may not be of importance for a particular period of time in conditions of isolation. However the point is that a thriving communism is unlikely in these conditions and instead the pressures for the reintroduction of capitalism will be greater than the significance of the creativity of the people.

In other words the problem with Kropotkin’s standpoint is his voluntarism. He argues that he creative action of the people can overcome virtually any difficult situation. He is not wrong to argue that people can provide more food because of greater organisation of production but this argument is not sufficient in relation to the question of establishing the conditions for communism. This is because communism requires abundance and self sufficiency does not create abundance instead it is the organisation of scarce national resources. In this context the tendency will be for the promotion of centralisation by the state rather than the flourishing of the voluntary work of communism. This is what happened in the October revolution because of the problem of national isolation and scarcity and it could be argued that these problems would also have influenced the development of an Anarchist revolution. Hence Kropotkin is trying to defend the consolationist view that communism can be possible in all types of social conditions and an unfavourable situation need not undermine the prospect of the construction of communism. The problem with this argument is that the enthusiasm of the people may not be sufficient to realise communism and instead the adverse conditions create a situation that has not been intended. This is why his conception of communism in a situation of self sufficiency is problematical and he does not allow for reverses and defeats in his approach. Instead his voluntarist logic can only conceive of the prospect of victory and the successful realisation of communism in all types of social conditions. This methodology was later utilised by Stalin in order to justify socialism in one country. Kropotkin believed that he had provided the policy that could avoid the defeats of past revolutions. He argued that the communist revolution should avoid the terror of the past and state centralisation and resolve the food problem. The result would be communism. To some extent he is correct communism cannot be built based on terror and with a food problem but there are also other problems that may undermine its success like isolation. Consequently Kropotkin’s view that communism can be realised in conditions of self sufficiency was one of his major idealist illusions. His approach could not contemplate the prospect of defeat in a situation of national isolation.

Kropotkin also contends that with the introduction of communist methods of organisation the level of production in industry and agriculture can be increased in order to realise needs. He is suggesting that the communist social relations of production are superior to capitalism and that with the transformation of economic activity the methods of the organisation of production will become more efficient. Marx would generally agree with this point and it is part of the argument of historical materialism as to why capitalism should be replaced with communism. However the point of controversy is about whether the superiority of communism in comparison to capitalism can be immediately realised. Kropotkin would argue that the merits of communism can be immediately expressed with the transformation of social relations and the introduction of more effective methods of organisation of production. It is assumed that the workers and peasants already have the appropriate level of knowledge and cultural experience to enable them to organise production in a communist manner. Marx does not make this assumption. The maturity of the workers and peasants for the development of communism will depend on the level of the productive forces inherited from capitalism and it is quite possible that working people will still have to go through a period of learning before it is possible to introduce communist methods of organisation. This does not mean that Kropotkin’s assumptions are wrong instead he is being dogmatic about the possibility of the immediate introduction of communism. In other words it may be possible to make a revolution before all the pre-conditions for communism have matured and this is precisely why a transition period is required before communism can be realised. Kropotkin is providing the arguments as to why people should be confident that communism can succeed and be superior to capitalism. The merit of communism is that it can realise needs in a manner that capitalism cannot and it can overcome the alienating domination of capital over labour. In order for these possibilities to be realised people need to take control of their own destiny and to act together to realise communism. This is a point made adamantly by Kropotkin but it also means he cannot envisage the difficulties. Instead he argues that any potential problems like food production can be resolved by the introduction of communist methods of organisation. His advice about how to improve food production is important and useful but his confidence can be considered problematical.

The problem with the description of how agriculture could be improved is not about its practicality and the fact that without the domination of capital it will be possible for technology to promote the development of production. Instead the problem is that the view that communism can instantly replace capitalism results in voluntarism:

“If only humanity had the consciousness of what it can and if that consciousness only gave it the power to will!

If it only knew that cowardice of the spirit is the rock on which all revolutions have stranded until now.”(p275)

The problem with past revolutions has not been the failure of spirit or the lack of consciousness about what is possible but rather the level of the productive forces has meant it is not possible to realise a communist revolution. Indeed it can be argued that many previous revolutions have been successful in terms of the objectives they expressed in relation to the level of their historical development. Hence the French revolution of 1789 was not a failure because of an inability to realise communism and equality instead it was a successful bourgeois revolution that was able to overcome the limitations of feudalism. The regime of terror was introduced because of the incompatible demands of the poor and the rich and the end of the Jacobin dictatorship led to the consolidation of bourgeois domination over society and prepared the political basis for capitalist economic development. The poor did express aspect of revolutionary consciousness and this legacy was shown in the revolution of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871. The Commune was not a failure and instead was defeated by stronger forces but during its existence it showed the possibility for the development of a society that was not based on the logic of capital. The creation of the Paris Commune indicated that the contemporary revolution would be proletarian in composition and would be inspired by the aim of communism. However even the Commune was premature because of the low level of development of the productive forces in France and the dominance of artisan production. Hence the Commune was an expression of what would happen in the future and was an indication that the class struggle between the workers and capitalists was intensifying and so creating the political conditions for communist revolution. This point was confirmed by the Russian revolution of 1905 and 1917. Only the 20th century could be the era of proletarian revolution because of the level of capitalist development. In this context past revolutions were not failures and instead contributed to the promotion of the process that led to the era of proletarian revolution. In contrast in a non-historical manner Kropotkin suggests that 1789 and 1848 were failed proletarian revolutions and the reason for their failure was a lack of consciousness of the aims of equality and communism. This situation is even located in terms of timidity and caution and the lack of will of the participants in the revolutions. Such a standpoint is extremely subjective and ignores the importance of historical conditions and ignores the fact that communism was not objectively possible. Only the development of capitalism as imperialism made proletarian revolution possible on a global scale and this did not occur until the 20th century. Until this time the conception of communism was still primitive and was only a minority current in 1789. The most sophisticated doctrine in 1789 was that of bourgeois democracy and this expressed the fact that what was occurring was a bourgeois revolution. Kropotkin tended to gloss over the class content of 1789 and instead impose the model of proletarian revolution as the criteria by which it should be evaluated. This was an idealist approach that could not establish the dynamics of what was happening. The result was his dogmatic view that consciousness was not sufficiently communist and this was a failure of will. But the point is that the question of will can only be formulated by the existing historical conditions and this meant the will for communism could not be present in 1789.

These limitations in Kropotkin’s approach would not be serious if they had no relevance for the strategy and tactics of proletarian revolution. However by conceiving of communism as a question of will and consciousness meant issues like the balance of class forces are ignored and so the role of strategy is neglected. The point is that communist consciousness is developed in the class struggle and that revolution is the act that represents the highest level of class consciousness. The Anarchist tends to emphasise the importance of will and determination in a manner that is not related to the development of the class struggle and so lacks a sense of strategy and tactics. The issue of how we overthrow capitalism remains puzzling and so the role of agency is also controversial. The Anarchist doctrine relies on the role of spontaneity but the question of making spontaneity conscious of revolutionary objectives is not addressed in their doctrines because this would suggest a role for authority and parties. Instead the emphasis is on revolutionary will but the relation of will to circumstances and the balance of class forces is not addressed. The point is that determination is not sufficient to bring about the overthrow of capitalism instead determination has to be connected to a perceptive appraisal of capitalism and of the possibilities for revolution. The problems at the level of strategy meant that the Anarchists tended to support the Syndicalist approach because they had a definite strategy. But Syndicalism was influenced by Marxism as much as Anarchism.

Furthermore one of Kropotkin’s most serious errors is that his enthusiasm for the prospects of agriculture results in him supporting a type of Populist or peasant socialism. He advocates that the workers leave the factories and go into the countryside: “They will leave the town and go into the fields! Aided by machinery that will enable the weakest of us to put a shoulder to the wheel, they will carry revolution into previously enslaved culture as they have carried it into institutions and ideas.”(p276) Kropotkin is right to argue that the impulse for creative and agreeable work will create an aspiration for an alternative to the factory and mass production. But the answer is not to increase employment in agriculture. Instead it may be possible to increase production in agriculture without increasing employment because of the role of technology and so the actual issue is how to develop industrial production without relying on the role of factories. This is because industrial production is still required for the process of consumption and the economy would become one-sided if agriculture was developed at the expense of industry. The important point is to create balance in the economy and the establishment of precise proportions between industry, agriculture and the services. Hence the answer does not reside in the creation of an essentially agricultural economy would be a retreat to the past. Kropotkin is right that the food problem is an important priority for communism but the answer is not with the return to a pre-industrial era. Instead the point is how to increase industrial production without the continuation of factories. How can agreeable work be created without the loss of efficiency? Kropotkin has the illusion that society can be brought together by the role of agriculture as France was in 1793 with the recognition of the importance of the peasantry. But this sense of togetherness was merely transitory and did not overcome the alienation of the peasants from the Jacobins. The brief political recognition of the importance of agriculture did not transcend the class contradictions of the bourgeois revolution of 1789. In this context an emphasis on the importance of agriculture will not resolve the problems of the attempt to construct communism. Instead it will represent the reversion to a past period that should not be re-invented. The aim is not the realisation of a peasant socialism and instead to create communism at the highest level of development. In general terms this is what Kropotkin aims to realise. He is well aware of the importance of technology for the development of communism. His call for a peasant socialism is a lapse that does not undermine his overall conception of communism as a historical advance from the limitations of capitalism.

Kropotkin summarises his standpoint in the following manner:

“Inspired by a new daring – thanks to the sentiment of solidarity – all will march together to the conquest of the high joys of knowledge and artistic creation.

A society thus inspired will fear neither dissensions within nor enemies without. To the coalitions of the past it will oppose a new harmony, the initiative of each and all, the daring which springs from the awakening of a people’s genius.

Before such an irresistible force “conspiring kings” will be powerless. Nothing will remain for them but to bow the bow before it, and to harness themselves to the chariot of humanity, rolling towards new horizons opened up by the Social Revolution.”(p278-279)

Kropotkin has made an important point that solidarity should be the basis of the new society. Without solidarity the ethic of cooperation and willingness to act together is not present and instead people will revert to an individualistic approach that will promote the conditions for the re-introduction of capitalism. One of the important problems with Marxism is that it lacked an ethic as a guide to action and ethics were rejected as being nothing more than an expression of bourgeois ideology. This was a mistake and this was shown during the process of degeneration of the October revolution when the lack of an ethics provided justification for the instrumental policy of modernisation and terror. The elaboration of an ethics of solidarity would have shown that Stalinism was unacceptable and it would have established the relationship between moral aims and the prospects for developing communism. The point is that the development of the productive forces does not advance progress towards communism if solidarity is being undermined by terror and other methods of coercion. Kropotkin also outlined that the realisation of solidarity create the conditions for the promotion of creative work and the prospect for the overcoming of alienation which is based on the estrangement of people from each other. Stalinism was a society of work alienation and mistrust between people because it was a society without solidarity. The fact that Stalinism negated solidarity indicated that it could not be building socialism and communism. The experience of the USSR showed that solidarity is not a moral luxury and is instead indispensable for communism. Hence the solidarity that is developed during the class struggle should not be undermined by a strong state and instead solidarity should be promoted in the institutions and methods for the development of communism.

Kropotkin also makes the point that a society based on solidarity can allow for the controversy generated by different views. There will be different conceptions of how to build communism but this is acceptable because of the reality of solidarity. This will mean all will be united around support for communism and so the differences will be limited within support for the same common goal. He does not explain how it is possible that some may still support capitalism rather than communism and he does not elaborate upon the importance of democracy for resolving differences between people of different views. Instead he assumes a society of harmony and uniformity and universal support for communism. His standpoint is based on the rejection of the importance of contradiction when describing the features of communism and instead he assumes harmony in a deterministic manner as the outcome of social evolution. However he is possibly right to argue that if society is making progress in a communist manner the conditions for harmony and solidarity will be generated and therefore there will be uniformity in society. His approach is based on the importance of the acceptance of Enlightenment reason and the glossing over of the importance of diversity. Contemporary communism has the problem of uniting the universal with the particular and we would argue that democracy is crucial for the resolution of differences. In contrast Kropotkin rejects the importance of democracy as an expression of authority and so his dogma results in a rigid conception of communist society that does the problem of tensions. It is right to suggest that solidarity can provide the basis of the resolution of differences but solidarity has to take a political form and this is democracy which Kropotkin rejects as being against the standpoint of communism.

Possibly the most controversial of his views is that the ruling class would come to accept the creation of communism and so not offer resistance to the communist revolution. This standpoint is based on his evolutionary approach and so glosses over the importance of the class struggle. Historical experience has indicated that the ruling class has been opposed to revolutionary change and even more limited changes. The Bolsheviks were aware that the expansion of revolution would result in counterrevolution. Then Stalinism became part of the counterrevolutionary opposition to proletarian revolution. The Cold war represented a system opposed to revolutionary change. However Kropotkin is right that the development of principled communism may undermine the resistance of the ruling class to revolutionary change. Genuine communist revolution would also attract popular support and this would also decrease the effectiveness of potential counterrevolution. However Kropotkin’s perspective is based on his dislike of contradiction and difference and so is one sided.

Kropotkin’s work is a valuable addition to the literature about communism. It has utopian and impractical features that cannot be realised but it also describes what a communist society could be like. In particular it outlines the importance of solidarity, well being and the realisation of needs. This work can be an inspiration for all those striving for communism in the present and his work is a supplement to Marxist theory about communism.